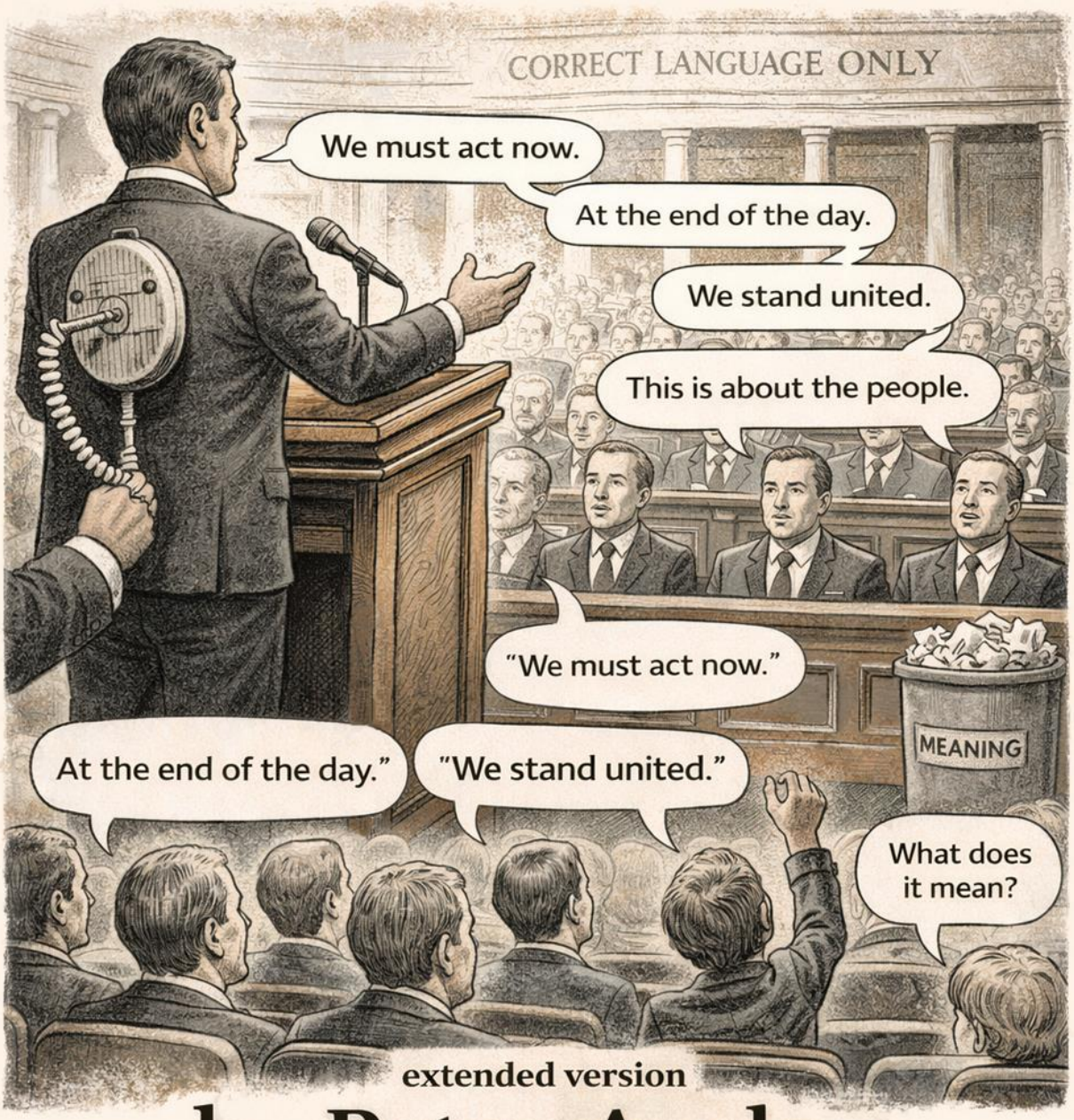
GRAMMAR OF BANALITY

THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY "The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."



extended version

by Peter Ayolov

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THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY
"The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."
Part 11
(Extended version*)

THE GRAMMAR OF BANALITY

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2026

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*(*The extended version expands the original text to accommodate a significantly larger body of material that could not be contained within a first four parts, allowing the argument to unfold with greater depth, continuity, and conceptual precision. It is written as a more comprehensive and elaborated version of the original, preserving its core structure while integrating additional analyses, examples, and theoretical developments that extend the scope of the work.)*

Introduction: The Ritual of Nothingness: Phatic Speech and the Slow Death of Meaning

This chapter is part of The Miscommunication Trilogy and develops one of its central arguments: the planned obsolescence of language. The premise is not that language suddenly collapses or disappears, but that it gradually transforms into a system that continues to function while losing its original purpose. Language persists, circulates, and expands, yet its capacity to carry meaning becomes increasingly unstable. Within this transformation, phatic communication emerges not as a marginal curiosity but as a key symptom of a deeper structural shift.

Phatic communication, first identified by Bronisław Malinowski, refers to forms of speech that do not primarily aim to convey information but to establish and maintain social contact. Greetings, small talk, conversational fillers, ritualized expressions—these are the building blocks of phatic speech. Later, Roman Jakobson incorporated this insight into his theory of language functions, defining the phatic function as the aspect of communication that ensures the channel between speaker and listener remains open. What is crucial here is not what is said, but the fact that something is said at all. At first glance, such forms of communication may appear trivial, even insignificant. They seem to occupy the margins of language, the spaces between meaningful exchanges. Yet this perception is misleading. Phatic communication does not exist at the edges of language; it constitutes one of its most persistent and pervasive modes. It governs everyday interaction, from casual encounters to formal exchanges, from face-to-face conversations to digital communication. Its ubiquity suggests that it is not an exception but a rule. This raises a fundamental question: what happens when the maintenance of contact becomes more important than the transmission of meaning? The evidence suggests that contemporary communication increasingly prioritizes presence over content. Expressions such as “How are you?” or “Nice day” no longer function as genuine inquiries or observations. They are not meant to be answered in any meaningful way. Instead, they serve as signals—indicators that the communicative channel is active, that the participants acknowledge each other’s presence. The informational content of these expressions is minimal or nonexistent, yet their social function is indispensable.

In this sense, phatic communication reveals a shift from language as a system of representation to language as a system of regulation. It does not describe the world; it organizes social relations. It does not transmit knowledge; it manages interaction. The value of an utterance is no longer measured by what it says but by what it does—by its ability to create, maintain, or modify a social bond. This functional reorientation is central to the argument of the planned obsolescence of language. Language is not becoming useless; it is becoming something else. The concept of obsolescence is often associated with technological products designed to wear out over time. Applied to language, it suggests a process in which linguistic forms lose their original function while remaining in circulation. Phatic expressions exemplify this process. They are linguistic remnants—forms that once carried meaning but have been reduced to ritual. Their persistence is not due to their informational value but to their social necessity. They are maintained because they perform a function, even if that function is no longer cognitive. This transformation is closely linked to the dynamics of politeness and social distance. Phatic communication operates as a mechanism for negotiating relationships. It allows speakers to express solidarity, respect, empathy, or neutrality without committing to substantive content. In hierarchical contexts, it can reinforce power relations; in egalitarian contexts, it can create a sense of familiarity. The same expression

can signal different meanings depending on the situation, the participants, and the cultural context. What remains constant is its role as a mediator of social interaction.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this mediation is not optional. In many cultures, silence is perceived as uncomfortable or even threatening. The absence of speech can be interpreted as a lack of interest, a sign of hostility, or a breakdown of communication. Phatic speech fills this void. It prevents silence by providing a continuous stream of low-content utterances that sustain the interaction. In doing so, it transforms communication into a process of constant maintenance. The goal is not to say something meaningful but to avoid saying nothing at all. This avoidance of silence has far-reaching consequences. It creates an environment in which language is constantly active but rarely informative. The proliferation of phatic expressions leads to a saturation of discourse, where the volume of communication increases while its informational density decreases. This is particularly evident in digital communication, where messages are often reduced to minimal signals—short acknowledgments, emojis, automatic responses. These forms of interaction are highly efficient in maintaining contact but largely devoid of substantive content. The digital environment amplifies the tendencies already present in face-to-face communication. It accelerates the shift toward phaticity by privileging speed, frequency, and accessibility over depth and reflection. The result is a form of communication that is always on, always available, always responsive, yet increasingly detached from meaning. Language becomes a continuous flow of signals, a network of connections that sustains itself through repetition.

Within the framework of The Miscommunication Trilogy, this condition is not an anomaly but a defining feature of contemporary communication. The planned obsolescence of language is not a deliberate strategy imposed from above but an emergent property of social and technological systems. As communication becomes more central to social life, the pressure to maintain constant contact increases. Phatic communication provides a solution to this pressure, but at a cost. It replaces meaning with presence, content with continuity, depth with surface. This does not mean that meaningful communication disappears entirely. Rather, it becomes embedded within a larger system dominated by phatic interaction. Moments of genuine exchange are interspersed with long sequences of ritualized speech. The boundary between meaningful and meaningless communication becomes blurred, as even substantive utterances are framed by phatic elements. A conversation begins with greetings, is sustained by small talk, and ends with polite closures. The informational core is surrounded by a shell of phatic expressions that both enable and constrain it. This structure reflects a deeper tension within language itself. On the one hand, language aspires to convey meaning, to represent reality, to express thought. On the other hand, it functions as a social tool, a means of establishing and maintaining relationships. Phatic communication exposes the limits of the first function by emphasizing the second. It shows that language can fulfill its social role even when its representational role is diminished. In doing so, it challenges the traditional hierarchy that places meaning at the center of communication.

The implications of this challenge are profound. If language can operate without meaning, then meaning is no longer its defining feature. Communication becomes an end in itself, a self-sustaining process that does not require external justification. The success of an interaction is measured not by what is communicated but by the fact that communication occurs. This redefinition of success aligns with the logic of the planned obsolescence of language. Language is not evaluated based on its capacity to inform but on its ability to persist. Phatic communication, therefore, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon; it is a window into the broader dynamics of contemporary society. It reflects a world in which connection is prioritized over content, interaction over information, presence over meaning. It reveals a form of sociality that depends on

continuous communication but is increasingly detached from what is communicated. In this world, language does not disappear; it multiplies. It does not fail; it adapts. It becomes a system that functions by emptying itself. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of phatic communication as both a linguistic and social phenomenon. It situates phatic speech within the broader context of the planned obsolescence of language, highlighting its role as both symptom and mechanism. By examining the forms, functions, and implications of phatic communication, the chapter seeks to uncover the deeper logic that governs contemporary discourse. The aim is not to lament the loss of meaning but to understand the conditions under which such a loss becomes possible—and even necessary.

1. BANALITY

The Decree of the Ordinary: How Banality Became a Regime of Speech

In the historical and etymological account of the term "banal" as presented in the lexicographic and historical descriptions of feudal banalités, the word emerges not as a trivial descriptor of dullness, but as the residue of a system of command embedded in language itself, where what is "commonplace" was once what was decreed, enforced, and publicly proclaimed. The origin of the term in the Proto-Germanic bannan, meaning to speak publicly or to proclaim, reveals that banality begins not in repetition, but in authority—the authority to declare what must be shared, used, and ultimately, said. From this root, the semantic shift unfolds: from proclamation to obligation, from obligation to communal usage, and from communal usage to the erosion of distinction, until what is common becomes indistinguishable from what is trivial. In this transformation, banality is not merely the fading of meaning, but the historical sediment of power inscribed into language as habit.

The feudal institution of banalités in France offers a material grounding for this linguistic evolution. Under this regime, peasants were compelled to use the lord's mill, oven, or wine press, paying for access to what was ostensibly communal but in fact monopolized. These were not optional conveniences but enforced circuits of daily life, where even the most basic acts—grinding grain, baking bread—were routed through a system of authority. The four banal or the communal oven was not simply shared; it was mandated. The word "banal," therefore, originally described not what was ordinary, but what was subject to decree, what was held under the jurisdiction of power and opened to all precisely through its compulsory nature. What was common was not freely shared but administratively distributed, and in this enforced sharing, individuality was dissolved into regulated repetition. The structure of these rights extended beyond simple usage. The monopolistic logic of banalité included exclusive control over animal breeding, such as the right of the lord to maintain bulls or boars, rendering even biological reproduction a site of regulated access. Alongside these obligations stood the corvée, the compulsory labor that further bound the peasant body to the rhythms of feudal command. Here, the economy of banality reveals its full dimension: it is not only a matter of objects and services but of time, labor, and life itself. The peasant does not merely use the banal oven; he inhabits a banalized existence, structured by repeated acts dictated from above. In this sense, banality is not a superficial quality but a deep condition of being subjected to repetition without authorship.

This system was not confined to France. Across Europe, analogous practices emerged under different names—Banrecht in the Netherlands, Ehaft in Germany, thirlage in Scotland—each enforcing a similar logic of monopolized commonality. The persistence of these practices beyond the medieval period suggests that banality, as a structure, is not bound to a single historical moment but recurs wherever authority organizes the everyday through compulsory channels. Even in

colonial contexts such as New France, where the obligation to use the lord's mill was framed as beneficial due to the maintenance of infrastructure and defense, the underlying logic remained intact: access was granted through obligation, and utility was inseparable from control. The fortified mill, serving both economic and defensive functions, becomes a symbol of this duality—protection and restriction fused into a single institution. The abolition of banal rights during the French Revolution marks a formal rupture in this system, yet the semantic residue of the term persists. When "banal" comes to mean trite or commonplace, it carries with it the memory of enforced sameness, of a world in which difference was suppressed through regulated repetition. The triviality associated with banality is thus not an inherent property of the ordinary but the aftereffect of a long history in which the ordinary was standardized, imposed, and circulated without variation. What appears as dullness is in fact the echo of a command that has been internalized, repeated so often that its origin in authority is forgotten.

To understand banality in this deeper sense is to recognize it as a linguistic and social mechanism that transforms decree into habit. The proclamation becomes the routine, and the routine becomes invisible. Language itself participates in this process, as words lose their specificity through overuse, becoming placeholders for meanings that no longer resonate. Just as the peasant was required to use the lord's mill, the speaker is compelled to use the available vocabulary, circulating phrases that have been emptied by repetition. The banal word is not chosen but inherited, not created but imposed through the accumulated weight of prior usage. In this light, banality reveals itself as a grammar of constraint, a system in which the forms of expression are pre-structured by historical forces that dictate what can be said and how it can be said. The speaker, like the peasant, operates within a network of obligatory pathways, where deviation is costly and conformity is normalized. The commonplace phrase is the linguistic equivalent of the communal oven: accessible to all, yet owned by none, and used not out of preference but necessity. The repetition of such phrases produces a surface of communication that appears shared but is in fact standardized, reducing the possibility of genuine expression.

Extending this insight further, banality can be seen as a condition in which language itself becomes a site of managed circulation, where meanings are distributed, consumed, and recycled without renewal. The historical transition from decree to triviality mirrors a broader process in which authority no longer needs to enforce its commands overtly, as they have been absorbed into the very structure of communication. The banal statement does not feel imposed; it feels natural, inevitable, even obvious. Yet this apparent naturalness is the result of a long process of normalization, in which the extraordinary becomes ordinary through repetition, and the ordinary becomes empty through overexposure. In this sense, the grammar of banality operates as a silent continuation of the feudal logic it once named. While the explicit structures of *banalités* have been dismantled, their underlying principle persists in the way language organizes thought and interaction. The communal facilities have been replaced by communal expressions, the mills and ovens by phrases and clichés that circulate endlessly. The obligation to use the lord's tools has become the compulsion to use inherited forms of speech, and the fee paid is the loss of originality, the surrender of singular voice to collective repetition.

Thus, banality is not merely a descriptor of dullness but a historical and structural condition in which language enforces a subtle regime of sameness. It is the afterlife of decree in the domain of expression, the transformation of authority into habit, and the quiet erosion of meaning through compulsory use. To speak banally is not simply to lack imagination; it is to participate in a system where imagination has been pre-empted by the very forms available for use, where the possibility of saying something new is constrained by the weight of what has already been said. In this way,

the banal is not the absence of meaning but the excess of imposed meaning, repeated until it becomes indistinguishable from silence.

Bloch, M. (1961) Feudal Society. London: Routledge

Doyle, W. (1980) Origins of the French Revolution. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flags Without Fire: The Silent Repetition of Belonging

In Michael Billig's Banal Nationalism (1995), the nation appears not as a spectacle of passion or ideological excess, but as a quiet, persistent murmur embedded in the ordinary gestures of everyday life, where identity is not proclaimed but continuously rehearsed through unnoticed signs and linguistic habits. What Billig reveals is not the dramatic eruption of nationalist fervor, but its most durable form: the unnoticed repetition that sustains the nation without ever naming it as such. In this sense, nationalism is not an event but a background condition, a constant low-intensity signal that orients perception and belonging without demanding conscious attention.

The concept of banal nationalism marks a decisive shift away from understanding nationalism as something exceptional or pathological. Instead, it locates the force of national identity in the most trivial details: the flag hanging without ceremony, the phrasing of news that distinguishes between "domestic" and "international," the casual invocation of "our" in reference to weather, sports, or politics. These are not mere linguistic conveniences but subtle acts of alignment, continually positioning the speaker within a shared imaginary. The nation, in this framework, is not something one explicitly affirms but something one implicitly inhabits, a structure that precedes individual intention and quietly organizes it. The power of these banal forms lies precisely in their invisibility. Unlike overt nationalism, which demands recognition and often provokes resistance, banal nationalism operates beneath the threshold of critique. It is effective because it does not appear as ideology but as common sense, as the natural way of speaking and perceiving. The repetition of these signs does not reinforce belief through argument but through habituation. Over time, the nation becomes not a concept but a background assumption, a silent coordinate that structures all other meanings. This unnoticed quality also explains why banal nationalism has been historically underestimated. Scholarly attention has often focused on the dramatic expressions of nationalism—revolutions, wars, extremist movements—while neglecting the mundane practices that make such expressions possible. Billig's intervention exposes this imbalance, showing that the visible intensity of "hot" nationalism depends on the invisible continuity of its banal counterpart. The everyday rehearsal of belonging provides the emotional and cognitive infrastructure upon which more explicit forms of nationalism can be mobilized. Without this constant background reinforcement, the moments of nationalist fervor would lack their grounding.

The persistence of banal nationalism in an era of globalization further complicates narratives of the nation-state's decline. Despite the expansion of global networks and institutions, national frameworks remain deeply entrenched. Even ostensibly international organizations operate through the logic of national representation, and global cooperation is often articulated in the language of national interest. The paradox is that globalization does not dissolve nationalism but rather reconfigures it, intensifying its presence precisely by embedding it more deeply into the structures of everyday life. Borders may become more porous in some respects, but they are simultaneously reinforced in others, both materially and symbolically. Billig's later reflections acknowledge that the original distinction between "banal" and "hot" nationalism was too rigid, as in practice these forms coexist and overlap. A single discourse can oscillate between subtle reinforcement and explicit assertion, revealing that nationalism is not a fixed state but a dynamic

spectrum. This insight deepens the concept, showing that banal nationalism is not a separate category but a continuous condition that can intensify or recede depending on context. The banal and the overt are not opposites but different expressions of the same underlying structure. Critiques of the concept, particularly those pointing to its alleged Western bias, have also contributed to its refinement. The recognition that banal nationalism operates across diverse cultural and political contexts underscores its universality. Whether in established or emerging nation-states, the mechanisms of subtle reinforcement remain remarkably consistent. This suggests that banal nationalism is not tied to a specific historical or geographical setting but is a general feature of how collective identities are maintained through repetition and normalization.

More recent research has expanded the scope of banal nationalism by examining how it is appropriated and reinterpreted by individuals and communities. The emergence of bottom-up nationalism demonstrates that the symbols and practices of national identity are not merely imposed from above but are actively engaged with, contested, and reshaped. This interaction reveals a complex interplay between structure and agency, where the same banal forms can be used to reinforce or challenge dominant narratives. Yet even in these acts of reinterpretation, the underlying framework of national belonging remains intact, continuing to shape the terms of engagement. At its most profound level, banal nationalism operates not only as a set of practices but as a limitation on political imagination. By framing concepts such as “the people” within national boundaries, it constrains the possibilities for thinking beyond the nation-state. Alternative visions of political organization become difficult to articulate, not because they are logically impossible, but because the language and symbols available are already structured by national assumptions. The nation thus becomes both the subject and the horizon of political thought, defining what can be imagined as real or viable. Extending these insights further, banal nationalism can be understood as a specific instance of a broader phenomenon: the transformation of repetition into unquestioned reality. Just as the feudal ban once dictated the use of communal resources, the modern nation-state subtly dictates the use of shared symbols and linguistic forms. The obligation is no longer enforced through explicit decree but through the inertia of habit. To speak within a language is already to participate in its implicit alignments, to reproduce its unnoticed assumptions. The banal phrase, like the banal flag, is not chosen but inherited, and its repetition sustains the very structure it conceals.

In this perspective, banal nationalism becomes a linguistic and symbolic regime in which identity is not imposed through force but maintained through continuity. The repetition of the same words, the same images, the same distinctions produces a stable field of meaning that resists disruption. What appears as neutrality is in fact a highly structured form of alignment, where deviation requires effort and conformity is effortless. The banal thus reveals itself as a mechanism of persistence, ensuring that the nation remains present even when it is not actively invoked. This condition points toward a deeper transformation in the nature of communication itself. When meaning is sustained through repetition rather than renewal, language begins to lose its capacity for genuine articulation. The familiar replaces the expressive, and communication becomes a process of circulating already established forms. In this sense, banal nationalism is not only a political phenomenon but a symptom of a broader tendency in which language becomes increasingly self-referential, reproducing its own patterns rather than generating new ones. The nation, as one of the most powerful of these patterns, exemplifies how repetition can create the illusion of permanence while gradually eroding the vitality of expression.

Thus, the quiet force of banal nationalism lies not in what it declares but in what it makes unnecessary to declare. It transforms identity into an unspoken premise, a background certainty

that shapes perception and action without entering into awareness. In doing so, it reveals how power can operate most effectively when it disappears into the ordinary, when the structures that govern life are no longer recognized as structures at all. The banal, far from being insignificant, is the very condition under which significance is silently organized and endlessly repeated.

Billig, M. (1995) Banal Nationalism. London: Sage Publications.

The Invisible Interface: When the Ordinary Becomes Algorithm

In Zara Dinnen's The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture, the notion of the digital banal emerges as a conceptual lens through which the unnoticed saturation of digital media in everyday life can be understood not as neutrality, but as a carefully constructed disappearance of mediation. What appears as seamless interaction—clicking, scrolling, messaging—is in fact the result of an immense infrastructure of design, labor, and control that withdraws from perception precisely at the moment it becomes most effective. The digital banal is not simply the presence of technology in daily routines, but the condition under which this presence ceases to be perceived as presence at all.

Digital platforms present themselves as extensions of human communication, as if they merely facilitate what already exists rather than reshape it. Interfaces such as Facebook operate under the illusion of transparency, suggesting that connection, expression, and interaction occur naturally within their spaces. Yet this apparent naturalness is the result of a sustained rhetorical effort to conceal the constructed nature of these environments. The banalization of the digital lies in this transformation: from technological artifact to assumed condition, from visible tool to invisible necessity. The user no longer encounters the platform as something external, but inhabits it as a background of experience. The language surrounding digital innovation reinforces this disappearance. Claims of constant transformation—devices that will "change everything"—paradoxically normalize disruption by making it expected. The extraordinary becomes routine, and the routine becomes unquestioned. Metaphors such as the "Cloud" further abstract the material reality of digital systems, masking the physical infrastructures, the extraction of resources, and the labor conditions that sustain them. In this abstraction, the digital world appears weightless, detached from the constraints of geography and politics, even as it depends on them entirely. Narrative forms provide a unique entry point into this condition, as they capture the subtle integration of digital media into lived experience. In contemporary fiction, digital interactions often appear as fleeting details—background actions that do not demand attention. A character searches online, sends a message, checks a device; these gestures are presented without emphasis, as if they were no more significant than breathing or walking. Yet it is precisely in this lack of emphasis that their significance resides. The digital becomes part of the texture of reality, a silent partner in every action, shaping possibilities without announcing its presence.

This dynamic echoes the notion of the reality effect, where insignificant details create the impression of authenticity. The casual inclusion of digital actions in narrative does not merely reflect reality; it constructs a version of reality in which technology is inseparable from the human. The banal thus becomes a mechanism of naturalization, integrating the digital so thoroughly into representation that its artificiality disappears. What remains is a world in which mediation is omnipresent yet unacknowledged, a condition where the distinction between human action and technological process becomes increasingly blurred. The effectiveness of digital systems depends on this very effacement. Like a well-designed text that disappears into the act of reading, digital platforms function most smoothly when their operations are not perceived. Algorithms curate

information, prioritize content, and shape interactions, yet their influence is rarely experienced as intervention. Instead, the user encounters a personalized environment that feels immediate and intuitive, as if it were a direct extension of their own preferences. This illusion of immediacy is the core of the digital banal: the substitution of mediated experience for unmediated reality. Within platforms such as Facebook, this condition takes on a particularly revealing form. The architecture of the platform organizes social life into a continuous present, a flow of updates and interactions that resists reflection. Users remain engaged within this temporal loop, responding to stimuli without pausing to consider the mechanisms that generate them. The notion of connection is redefined as proximity without depth, a form of presence that does not require commitment or sustained attention. Relationships are maintained through minimal gestures, producing a sense of belonging that is both constant and superficial.

This reconfiguration of sociality illustrates the broader implications of the digital banal. Communication becomes less about the exchange of meaning and more about the maintenance of visibility within a system. The individual is not only a participant but also a unit of data, contributing to the continuous production of content that sustains the platform. In this process, the boundaries between expression and consumption dissolve, as every act of communication is simultaneously an act of participation in a larger system of circulation. The political dimension of this condition becomes evident when one considers what remains hidden. The sleek surfaces of digital devices conceal the complex networks of production that make them possible: the extraction of rare materials, the exploitation of labor, the environmental costs of manufacturing and disposal. These realities are excluded from the everyday experience of the digital, replaced by an image of effortless functionality. The banal thus operates as a form of concealment, directing attention away from the conditions of possibility and toward the immediacy of use. Cultural representations often replicate this concealment, presenting digital technologies as inevitable components of modern life. Even when narratives attempt to explore their origins or implications, they frequently fall back on the logic of inevitability, portraying technological development as a natural progression rather than a series of decisions shaped by specific interests and power structures. The digital banal, in this sense, is not only a feature of technology but a feature of its representation, a mode of storytelling that reinforces the illusion of inevitability.

To engage critically with this condition requires a shift in attention, a willingness to focus on what appears insignificant. The banal detail becomes a site of inquiry, revealing the structures that it conceals. By examining the unnoticed aspects of digital life—the habitual gestures, the default settings, the unexamined assumptions—one can begin to uncover the processes that shape subjectivity and interaction. Literature and other cultural forms play a crucial role in this effort, as they have the capacity to render the invisible visible, to disrupt the seamlessness of the digital and expose its mechanisms. Extending this perspective further, the digital banal can be understood as a contemporary form of linguistic and communicative regulation. Just as earlier systems of authority structured access to resources through compulsory channels, digital platforms structure access to expression through predefined interfaces and algorithmic filters. The user operates within a framework that determines not only what can be said but how it can be said, guiding communication through templates, prompts, and constraints. The apparent freedom of digital expression is thus accompanied by a subtle standardization, where individuality is shaped by the available forms of articulation. In this condition, communication risks becoming an act of repetition rather than creation. The circulation of familiar formats, phrases, and responses produces a landscape in which novelty is increasingly difficult to sustain. The digital banal does not eliminate expression but channels it into predictable patterns, reinforcing existing structures rather

than challenging them. What emerges is a form of communication that is continuous yet constrained, dynamic yet repetitive, expansive yet enclosed within the logic of the system.

The challenge, then, is not to escape the digital but to perceive it differently. By recovering the sense of novelty that has been obscured by habituation, it becomes possible to recognize the digital as a constructed environment rather than a natural one. This recognition opens the possibility of critique, allowing for an examination of the assumptions and power relations embedded within digital systems. The banal, once exposed, reveals itself as a site of tension, where the ordinary conceals the extraordinary and where the unnoticed holds the key to understanding the conditions of contemporary life. In this way, the digital banal is not simply a description of everyday experience but a diagnosis of a broader transformation in communication. It marks the point at which mediation becomes indistinguishable from immediacy, where the structures that shape interaction withdraw from perception, and where the repetition of the ordinary produces a new form of constraint. To think with the digital banal is to confront this condition, to trace the invisible lines that organize experience, and to question the narratives that render them inevitable.

Dinnen, Z. (2018) The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Endless Present of Code: Banality After the Disappearance of the Digital

In Zara Dinnen's The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture, the claim that the internet is "dead," as articulated by Hito Steyerl, signals not an end but a total saturation, a condition in which the distinction between online and offline dissolves into a seamless continuity where mediation no longer appears as mediation. The digital does not vanish; it becomes indistinguishable from reality itself. In this transformation, the subject is no longer a user who occasionally enters a technological space but a constant participant in a networked field, continuously rendered as data, as trace, as calculable presence. What once required connection now defines existence.

This condition is further illuminated by the insight that everyday life has been translated into numerical abstraction, a grid of values that can be processed, predicted, and manipulated. The world becomes legible to algorithms not as lived experience but as quantifiable input, and in this translation, perception itself begins to align with the logic of computation. The banal here is not simply the repetition of the ordinary but the normalization of this translation, the acceptance of a reality that is already pre-processed before it is consciously encountered. The subject navigates a world that has been structured in advance, where choices appear open but are subtly guided by unseen operations. The notion of becoming-with media captures this entanglement, suggesting that the human and the digital are no longer separable entities but co-constitutive processes. Yet this co-constitution is marked by a paradox: the more deeply embedded digital mediation becomes, the less visible it is. The mechanisms that shape experience withdraw into the background, presenting themselves as natural extensions of life rather than as historically and politically situated systems. The digital banal emerges precisely at this point of disappearance, where ubiquity produces invisibility, and transformation presents itself as continuity.

To confront this condition requires an effort to recover the sense of novelty that has been obscured by repetition. The digital banal operates by rendering the new familiar, by integrating each technological shift into the routines of everyday life so quickly that its difference is never fully perceived. Narrative and cultural forms provide moments of interruption, instances where the unnoticed becomes visible. The depiction of mundane digital interactions—waiting, searching,

communicating—reveals the extent to which these actions are structured by systems that remain unacknowledged. What appears trivial is in fact a site of transformation, where the contours of contemporary existence are continuously reshaped. The role of code in this process introduces a temporal dimension that further complicates the experience of the digital. Rather than presenting a stable structure, code operates as an ongoing process, a continuous unfolding that resists closure. This produces a sense of an unresolved present, where the future is constantly anticipated but never fully realized. The digital banal thus aligns with a temporality of perpetual deferral, where each action leads not to resolution but to further engagement within the system. The ordinary becomes a sequence of micro-events, each insignificant in isolation yet collectively sustaining the continuity of the digital environment.

As digital mediation extends into social practices, it redefines the very nature of interaction. The transformation of cultural production into processes of remix and replication illustrates how novelty is reconfigured as repetition. What is presented as new often emerges from the recombination of existing elements, circulating within a system that rewards familiarity over rupture. Social media intensifies this dynamic, turning everyday life into a series of mediated performances, where visibility becomes a form of validation and existence is affirmed through its representation. The banal here is not the absence of meaning but its continuous reproduction in forms that resist transformation. This extension into sociality also reveals a deeper shift in the structure of experience. The individual is both observer and participant, producing content while simultaneously consuming it, embedded within a feedback loop that blurs the distinction between action and reaction. The digital banal thus becomes a condition of reflexivity without distance, where the subject is constantly engaged yet rarely positioned to reflect on the conditions of that engagement. The immediacy of interaction obscures the processes that enable it, reinforcing the sense that what is experienced is simply what is.

The material and historical dimensions of digital media complicate this apparent immateriality. The abstraction of contemporary technological culture creates a distance from its origins, effacing the labor and infrastructure that made it possible. The transition from early, tangible forms of software development to contemporary service-oriented platforms reflects a broader movement toward invisibility, where the mechanisms of production are hidden behind interfaces that prioritize ease of use. This concealment reinforces the digital banal by removing the traces of effort and contingency, presenting technology as self-sustaining and inevitable. Everyday practices such as waiting for a message or monitoring a transaction reveal the intersection of digital mediation with broader economic and environmental conditions. These moments, seemingly insignificant, are embedded within systems of precarity and extraction, linking the banal gestures of daily life to global processes of inequality and resource consumption. The digital banal thus operates across scales, connecting the most intimate actions to the most expansive structures, while maintaining the illusion that these connections do not exist.

Speculative and postapocalyptic narratives extend this logic into imagined futures, where the remnants of digital infrastructure persist even after the collapse of social order. These visions suggest that digital mediation is not merely a contingent feature of the present but a durable condition that outlasts the systems that produced it. The banal becomes inescapable, a residue that continues to structure experience even in the absence of the world it once supported. In this sense, the digital banal is not tied to a specific moment but represents a broader transformation in how reality is organized and perceived. The difficulty of representing this condition in literature points to its fundamental challenge. The banal resists narration because it lacks distinction; it is precisely what does not stand out. To depict it risks reproducing its invisibility, rendering it as background

rather than subject. Yet to ignore it is to omit a central dimension of contemporary life. This tension reveals the limits of traditional narrative forms, which rely on contrast and significance, in capturing a condition defined by continuity and effacement.

To engage critically with the digital banal, then, is to develop new modes of attention, forms of analysis that can register the significance of the insignificant. It requires a shift from the spectacular to the ordinary, from the visible to the hidden, from the event to the process. By tracing the unnoticed operations of digital mediation, one can begin to uncover the structures that shape perception, interaction, and thought. The banal becomes a point of entry into the mechanisms of power that operate not through overt control but through subtle normalization. In this expanded perspective, the digital banal reveals itself as a continuation of a broader historical logic in which systems of organization become most effective when they disappear from view. The structures that govern communication no longer impose themselves as external constraints but function as internalized conditions, guiding behavior through the design of environments rather than through explicit command. The interface replaces the decree, the algorithm replaces the law, and the user participates willingly in a system that shapes their actions without appearing to do so.

This transformation has profound implications for communication itself. When expression is mediated through predefined structures, the range of possible articulation is subtly constrained. The repetition of familiar formats and patterns produces a language that circulates efficiently but risks losing its capacity for innovation. The digital banal thus contributes to a condition in which communication becomes increasingly standardized, even as it appears diverse and dynamic. The proliferation of messages masks a deeper uniformity, where difference is absorbed into the logic of the system. To recognize this condition is not to reject the digital but to reframe it, to see it not as a neutral environment but as a structured field of possibilities and limitations. By recovering the novelty that has been obscured, it becomes possible to question the narratives of inevitability that sustain the digital banal. The ordinary reveals itself as constructed, the seamless as assembled, and the inevitable as contingent. In this recognition lies the potential for a different relation to technology, one that acknowledges its presence without surrendering to its invisibility.

Thus, the digital banal after the disappearance of the digital is not the end of mediation but its completion, a state in which mediation has become indistinguishable from reality. It is the condition under which the extraordinary has been absorbed into the ordinary, where transformation is experienced as continuity, and where the structures that shape life operate most effectively by remaining unseen. To think within this condition is to confront the limits of perception and the possibilities of critique, to trace the hidden lines that organize experience and to imagine how they might be redrawn.

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The Triumph of the Copy Without Origin: Banality at the Horizon of Simulation

In the philosophical framework of Jean Baudrillard as articulated across works such as The Perfect Crime and his theory of simulacra, the question of banality is no longer tied to repetition alone but to the complete exhaustion of the distinction between reality and its representation, where the ordinary becomes not merely overused but structurally unavoidable. Simulation, often misread as a simple substitution of the real with the fake, instead marks a far more radical transformation: the disappearance of the very possibility of distinguishing between the two. What emerges is not

illusion opposed to truth, but a system in which illusion precedes and produces what is later called reality.

The concept of the simulacrum, originating as an image or likeness, undergoes a decisive mutation in this framework. No longer a copy of something real, it becomes the primary condition of existence itself. The real, rather than being the origin, is revealed as a late construction, a product of systems that required stable reference points. In earlier configurations, reality functioned as a ground against which appearances could be measured. Yet this ground, once established, was always already dependent on signs, on symbolic structures that mediated access to it. The so-called real was never immediate; it was always staged, always produced through representation. Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra trace the historical unfolding of this condition. In the first order, appearances still maintain a relation to a presumed reality, even if that relation is deceptive. The illusion depends on the existence of something to be imitated. In the second order, industrial production introduces repetition, and the uniqueness of the original begins to dissolve. Objects are no longer singular but reproducible, and meaning becomes tied to exchange rather than presence. The third order completes this movement: signs no longer refer to anything beyond themselves. They circulate within a closed system, generating a hyperreality that is more coherent, more consistent, and therefore more persuasive than any prior notion of the real.

This final stage is where banality reaches its most refined form. It is no longer the trivial repetition of the same, but the structural inevitability of repetition in a system without origin. When signs refer only to other signs, novelty becomes impossible in any meaningful sense. What appears as difference is merely variation within a pre-established code. The banal is thus elevated from a descriptive category to an ontological condition: everything that appears must pass through the same circuits of equivalence, producing a world that is endlessly varied yet fundamentally indistinguishable. Central to this condition is the operation of the code, a system that predetermines meaning before it can emerge. Unlike earlier symbolic exchanges, which retained ambiguity and reversibility, the code functions through strict equivalence, reducing all differences to calculable distinctions. In this sense, digital systems and genetic codes serve as paradigmatic examples. They do not interpret the world; they format it, translating life and information into sequences that can be processed without remainder. The result is a universe in which meaning is no longer negotiated but assigned, no longer produced through interaction but generated through algorithmic logic.

Power, within this framework, cannot be localized in institutions or agents. It is dispersed across the very structures that organize perception and communication. Each order of simulacra produces its own regime of knowledge, but in the third order, this regime becomes totalizing. The code eliminates contradiction by preempting it, ensuring that all possible expressions are already accounted for within its system. In such a world, resistance cannot take the form of opposition, as opposition itself is immediately absorbed and neutralized. The system thrives on critique, incorporating it as yet another variation within its circuits. The disappearance of the social follows from this transformation. What was once conceived as a space of interaction, conflict, and negotiation dissolves into the mass, an entity that resists representation not through active rebellion but through indifference. This mass does not engage with meaning; it absorbs and nullifies it. Its silence is not a lack of response but a form of defiance, a refusal to participate in the production of significance. Hyperconformity, the exaggerated repetition of expected behaviors, becomes another strategy of resistance, exposing the emptiness of the system by fulfilling its demands too perfectly.

In this context, traditional political forms appear as simulations of participation. Elections, polls, and public discourse create the appearance of agency while reinforcing the structures that

predetermine outcomes. The distinction between representation and reality collapses, as both are generated within the same system of signs. What is presented as choice is already encoded, and what appears as debate is a managed circulation of positions that never escape the framework that contains them. Yet within this closed system, traces of symbolic exchange persist. These traces do not offer a return to an authentic reality but introduce moments of disruption, instances where meaning exceeds its assigned function. Such disruptions are fleeting and cannot be institutionalized, as they would immediately lose their force. They operate through excess, through gestures that cannot be fully integrated into the logic of equivalence. In this sense, resistance is not a program but an event, a break in the continuity of the system that reveals its contingency.

The connection between simulation and banality becomes most evident when considering the fate of communication itself. In a world governed by the code, language loses its capacity to generate new meanings. It becomes a medium of circulation rather than creation, a system for distributing preexisting forms rather than producing singular expressions. The banal is no longer the failure to say something new; it is the impossibility of doing so within a system that has already anticipated every variation. Communication continues, but it does so as repetition without origin, as movement without transformation. This condition resonates with the broader trajectory in which structures of authority become most effective when they no longer appear as such. Just as earlier systems imposed obligations through explicit decrees, the contemporary system operates through implicit codes that guide behavior without overt coercion. The subject participates freely, yet this freedom is structured by the parameters of the system. The banal, in this sense, is the form taken by power when it becomes indistinguishable from the conditions of existence.

To think against this condition is not to seek a return to a lost reality, as such a return is itself a simulation. Instead, it requires an awareness of the processes that produce the appearance of reality, an attention to the mechanisms that render the constructed as natural. By tracing the operations of the code, one can begin to identify the points at which the system reveals its limits, where the circulation of signs encounters something that cannot be fully absorbed. Thus, the end of the social and the rise of simulation do not mark the disappearance of meaning but its transformation into a controlled process, a regulated flow that maintains the coherence of the system. Banality, in this context, is not the absence of significance but its saturation, the condition in which meaning is everywhere and therefore nowhere, endlessly produced yet never experienced as new. It is the final stage of a process in which repetition has replaced origin, and where the copy no longer needs an original to justify its existence.

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The Algorithm of Belonging: Between Global Sameness and Digital Tribe

In the theoretical extension of Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism into the terrain of banal globalism and electronic nationalism, the struggle over identity no longer unfolds between nations alone but within the very infrastructures that mediate perception, where the internet becomes both the dissolving agent of inherited narratives and the generator of new, intensified forms of belonging. What once operated through the quiet repetition of flags, phrases, and rituals now migrates into networks of data, where identity is no longer merely reproduced but continuously recalibrated through digital circulation.

Banal nationalism, as originally formulated, depended on invisibility. Its strength lay in its ability to pass unnoticed, embedding itself in the everyday through linguistic habits and symbolic cues that required no reflection. The nation was not asserted; it was assumed. This assumption created a stable background against which all other meanings were organized. With the emergence of global media, this background began to shift. The rise of banal globalism introduced a competing framework, one that sought to normalize the idea of a shared planetary identity through similar mechanisms of repetition and abstraction. Terms such as global community, international cooperation, and universal values began to function as the new clichés, circulating without interrogation and presenting themselves as the natural horizon of political and cultural life. Yet this globalist banality encounters a fundamental limitation. Unlike national narratives, which draw on deep reservoirs of history, language, and collective memory, globalism operates at a level of abstraction that lacks experiential density. It offers inclusion without intimacy, connection without rootedness. As a result, its repetition does not produce the same affective depth. The global remains conceptually expansive but emotionally thin, unable to fully replace the structures it seeks to transcend.

It is within this gap that electronic nationalism emerges. The internet, initially celebrated as a space of openness and cosmopolitan exchange, reveals itself as a medium that intensifies rather than dissolves identity. By democratizing access to information, it disrupts the controlled narratives of traditional media, exposing inconsistencies, silences, and constructed myths. This disruption, however, does not lead to the disappearance of nationalism. Instead, it provokes its transformation. Deprived of centralized authority, national identity reconstitutes itself through decentralized networks, where individuals actively participate in its production and reinforcement. Language plays a decisive role in this transformation. Digital communication, far from homogenizing expression, enables the proliferation of local and national idioms, reinforcing boundaries even within global platforms. The use of native languages, the creation of localized domains, and the circulation of culturally specific content all contribute to the reassertion of difference within a shared technological space. The internet thus becomes a paradoxical environment: globally accessible yet locally fragmented, unified in infrastructure but divided in meaning.

This fragmentation is further intensified by the algorithmic organization of information. Social networks do not simply reflect existing identities; they actively shape them by curating content that aligns with user preferences and affiliations. What appears as spontaneous community formation is in fact guided by systems that prioritize engagement over diversity. The result is the formation of echo chambers, where national narratives can be amplified and radicalized without external interruption. Electronic nationalism, in this sense, is not merely a continuation of traditional nationalism but its algorithmic acceleration, a process in which repetition becomes more rapid, more targeted, and more immersive. The distinction between liberal and formal democracies highlights different configurations of this process. In pluralistic contexts, digital platforms often serve as sites of contestation, where alternative narratives challenge dominant discourses. Here, electronic nationalism emerges as a reaction against perceived globalist or liberal hegemonies, creating parallel spaces of identification that resist integration. In more centralized systems, by contrast, digital media aligns more closely with state power, reinforcing official narratives and extending the reach of traditional propaganda into new domains. In both cases, the internet does not neutralize ideology but reconfigures its modes of operation.

The interplay between banal globalism and electronic nationalism reveals a deeper dynamic: the persistence of banality as a structuring principle across different scales of identity. Whether national or global, these ideologies rely on repetition, normalization, and the suppression of

complexity. They differ not in their mechanisms but in their objects, one oriented toward the nation, the other toward the world. The conflict between them is therefore not a clash between fundamentally different logics but a competition between overlapping systems of meaning, each seeking to establish itself as the default framework through which reality is interpreted. Economic and political crises intensify this competition by destabilizing existing forms of belonging. In moments of uncertainty, individuals gravitate toward identities that promise coherence and continuity. The abstraction of globalism, lacking the immediacy of lived experience, often fails to provide this reassurance, while nationalism, even in its digital form, offers a more tangible sense of community. The resurgence of nationalist sentiment in such contexts is not a rejection of globalization but a response to its insufficiencies, an attempt to re-anchor identity within recognizable boundaries.

At the same time, the digital environment enables the proliferation of hybrid identities that combine elements of local, national, and global affiliations. These configurations challenge the binary opposition between nationalism and globalism, suggesting that identity in the contemporary world is not fixed but layered and dynamic. Yet even these hybrid forms remain subject to the logic of banality, as they are shaped by the same processes of repetition and normalization that govern more traditional identities. Extending this analysis further, one can see how the grammar of banality operates within digital communication as a whole. The constant circulation of familiar phrases, images, and narratives produces a landscape in which difference is quickly absorbed into established patterns. The speed and scale of digital exchange amplify this effect, reducing the time available for reflection and reinforcing the tendency toward immediate recognition rather than critical engagement. In such a context, identity becomes less a matter of deliberate construction than of continuous reinforcement, sustained by the ongoing repetition of signs that require no interpretation.

The convergence of banal globalism and electronic nationalism thus reveals a broader transformation in the conditions of communication. Identity is no longer anchored solely in institutions or traditions but is continuously mediated through networks that both expand and constrain its possibilities. The banal persists not as a residue of the past but as an adaptive mechanism, capable of operating across different ideological formations and technological environments. To engage critically with this condition requires an awareness of how these processes shape perception and belonging. It involves recognizing that what appears as natural or inevitable is often the result of sustained repetition, that the boundaries of identity are not given but produced, and that the digital spaces in which these boundaries are negotiated are themselves structured by forces that remain largely invisible. In this recognition lies the possibility of disrupting the seamlessness of these systems, of introducing moments of reflection that interrupt the automatic reproduction of identity. Thus, the tension between banal globalism and electronic nationalism does not resolve into a simple opposition but reveals the persistence of a deeper logic, one in which repetition organizes meaning and where the struggle over identity is conducted through the control of the ordinary. The internet does not transcend this logic; it intensifies it, transforming the banal into a dynamic field where belonging is continuously produced, contested, and redefined.

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The Quiet Syntax of Inequality: How Banality Stabilizes the Unjust

In the sociological and historical analyses of inequality such as those by Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson in Three Centuries of American Inequality and Willford I. King in Wealth and Income of the People of the United States, the persistence of disparity emerges not as an accidental feature of modern societies but as a deeply sedimented structure sustained not only by economic systems but by the language through which these systems are perceived, justified, and normalized. What appears as a chronic problem is, in fact, a stabilized condition, continuously reproduced through patterns of thought and expression that render inequality both visible and untouchable.

Across centuries, inequality demonstrates a remarkable resistance to transformation. Its fluctuations are minor when compared to its continuity. Even in periods marked by reformist ambition, where political initiatives claim to address disparities, the underlying structures remain largely intact. The endurance of inequality suggests that it is not merely tolerated but integrated into the functioning of society, operating as a background condition that shapes expectations, behaviors, and institutional responses. What is presented as a problem to be solved is, at a deeper level, a condition to be managed. This management is inseparable from the chronic nature of associated social problems. Poverty, crime, and social marginalization are not isolated phenomena but interconnected expressions of structural imbalance. Yet they are frequently interpreted through frameworks that individualize responsibility, shifting attention away from systemic causes. The expectation that individuals must adapt to their circumstances reinforces this displacement, transforming structural constraints into personal challenges. In this transformation, inequality becomes less a question of justice and more a question of adjustment, where the burden of resolution is transferred from institutions to individuals. Language plays a decisive role in this process. The vocabulary used to describe inequality operates not as a neutral medium but as an active mechanism of normalization. Terms such as disadvantaged or underprivileged appear to acknowledge disparity while simultaneously softening its implications. They replace direct confrontation with abstraction, converting conditions of injustice into categories that can be administratively managed. This banalization of language does not eliminate awareness of inequality but alters its affective and cognitive impact, reducing urgency and diffusing responsibility.

The effect of such language is the production of contradictory beliefs that coexist without tension. Societies proclaim commitments to equality, fairness, and merit, yet accept outcomes that contradict these principles. This contradiction does not lead to crisis because it is mediated through forms of expression that obscure its implications. By framing inequality as a technical issue, a matter of policy adjustment or economic fluctuation, discourse removes it from the domain of ethical judgment. The moral dimension is not denied but displaced, replaced by a vocabulary that prioritizes efficiency, management, and incremental change. Historical research reinforces the depth of this condition. The continuity of inequality across centuries indicates that it is not simply the result of specific policies or events but is embedded within the foundational structures of economic and social organization. The repetition of similar patterns across different periods suggests that inequality is reproduced through mechanisms that operate beyond immediate political interventions. These mechanisms include not only material arrangements but also symbolic and linguistic frameworks that shape how inequality is understood and addressed. The

persistence of policy failure further illustrates this dynamic. Initiatives designed to reduce inequality often focus on alleviating its symptoms rather than transforming its causes. This approach reflects a broader orientation toward maintenance rather than change, where the goal is to manage disparities within acceptable limits rather than to eliminate them. The language of policy contributes to this orientation by presenting inequality as a complex technical problem, one that requires expertise and gradual adjustment rather than fundamental reconfiguration.

This depersonalization has significant consequences for perception and engagement. When inequality is framed in abstract terms, the lived experiences of those affected become less visible. The focus shifts from concrete realities to generalized categories, from human suffering to statistical representation. This shift reduces the emotional and ethical resonance of inequality, making it easier to accept as an inevitable feature of social life. The banal language that facilitates this shift operates as a form of distancing, separating the observer from the observed and diminishing the impulse to act. At a deeper level, the normalization of inequality reflects a broader grammar of banality that structures communication in modern societies. Repetition plays a central role in this grammar, as familiar expressions and categories circulate without reflection, reinforcing existing frameworks. The more these expressions are used, the more they appear self-evident, and the less they are subjected to critical examination. In this way, language becomes a vehicle for the reproduction of inequality, not through explicit justification but through the quiet reinforcement of assumptions. This process aligns with a wider transformation in which systems of meaning become increasingly externalized. Individuals rely on established vocabularies and narratives to interpret their experiences, reducing the need for independent reflection. The result is a form of communication that prioritizes continuity over disruption, stability over change. Within this framework, inequality is not actively defended but passively sustained, embedded in the very terms through which it is discussed.

To challenge this condition requires more than policy reform; it requires a reconfiguration of language itself. The task is not simply to describe inequality more accurately but to disrupt the patterns of expression that render it acceptable. This involves reintroducing the moral dimension that has been obscured, reconnecting abstract categories with concrete experiences, and exposing the assumptions that underlie seemingly neutral terms. Such a shift would transform inequality from a managed condition into a contested one, reopening the possibility of meaningful change. In extending this analysis, one can see how the acceptance of inequality is not merely a failure of will or policy but a consequence of a broader system in which language, thought, and structure are aligned. The banal does not eliminate awareness; it organizes it in ways that limit its impact. By stabilizing contradictions and diffusing urgency, it creates a condition in which inequality can persist without generating sustained opposition. The challenge, therefore, lies in breaking this alignment, in creating spaces where language can once again function as a site of critical engagement rather than passive repetition. Thus, the enduring nature of inequality reveals not only the resilience of economic structures but the power of banal language to sustain them. It shows how the ordinary can become the medium through which injustice is normalized, how repetition can transform disparity into inevitability, and how the absence of critical reflection can stabilize conditions that would otherwise be intolerable. In recognizing this, one begins to see that the struggle against inequality is inseparable from the struggle over the forms of communication that define it, a struggle not only for redistribution but for the very terms in which reality is understood.

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The Seduction of Fragments: Fascism as the Aesthetic of Banality

In Alice Yaeger Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life, fascism appears not merely as a political formation but as a cultural and psychological constellation in which the banal is reproduced through aesthetic forms, technological mediation, and intellectual desire for unity in a fragmented world. Rather than emerging as a coherent doctrine, it circulates through marginal theories, artistic movements, and imaginative projections, gaining force precisely through its capacity to infiltrate the ordinary structures of perception and expression. Its appeal lies not in its explicit brutality but in its promise to overcome alienation, to restore immediacy where modernity has produced distance, and to transform fragmentation into an experience of total belonging.

The intellectual attraction of fascism must be situated within the broader crisis of modernity, where individuals experienced a growing separation from collective meaning. Liberalism and Marxism, each in their own way, appeared insufficient to resolve this fragmentation. Fascism positioned itself as an alternative that would dissolve these divisions, offering a vision of total integration in which art, politics, and life would converge. This promise was not articulated only in political terms but through a reconfiguration of language itself, a desire for a new expressive form capable of capturing immediacy and vitality without mediation. The banal, in this context, does not disappear; it is transformed into a medium through which unity is continuously rehearsed and reaffirmed. Technological developments intensified this transformation by altering the conditions of perception. The aerial view, the disembodied voice of radio, the fragmented sequences of film—all contributed to a reorganization of sensory experience. These technologies did not simply extend perception; they restructured it, creating new ways of seeing and hearing that paralleled the aesthetic ambitions of modernist movements. Fragmentation, once experienced as dislocation, became a principle of composition, a way of assembling meaning from disparate elements. Fascism appropriated this principle, converting the fragmentation of modern life into a controlled synthesis that appeared as unity.

At the same time, the technological capacity for destruction mirrored this aesthetic logic. The distance introduced by modern weaponry, where the act of killing could be separated from direct contact with the victim, echoed the separation of perception from presence. Violence became abstract, mediated through systems that concealed its immediacy. This abstraction aligns with the broader grammar of banality, in which repetition and distance render actions manageable, integrating them into routines that obscure their consequences. The aestheticization of violence thus becomes inseparable from its banalization, as both rely on the transformation of experience into forms that can be circulated without disruption. Media played a central role in this process by providing the means to fragment and recombine perception on a mass scale. Radio broadcasts, film images, and photographic representations created partial realities that could be assembled into coherent narratives. Fascist regimes exploited these capacities to produce slogans and images that condensed complex ideologies into simple, repeatable forms. The effectiveness of these forms lies in their incompleteness: they do not require full understanding but invite identification, allowing individuals to attach themselves to fragments that stand in for the whole. The banal here is not the absence of meaning but its reduction to manageable units that can be endlessly reproduced.

Psychoanalytic perspectives illuminate the deeper dynamics at work in this process. The relationship between the individual and the state can be understood through mechanisms of projection and identification, where desires and fears are externalized and then reabsorbed in idealized forms. The fragmentation of perception corresponds to a fragmentation of the self, which

seeks coherence through attachment to collective images. Fascist ideology exploits this need by offering figures and symbols that appear to unify the dispersed elements of experience. The individual becomes both the subject and the object of this process, internalizing the state while projecting unwanted elements onto designated others. The maternal imagery associated with fascism adds another layer to this dynamic. The state is represented as both nurturing and authoritative, combining protection with control. This duality creates a powerful emotional bond, one that promises security while demanding submission. The voice of authority, amplified through media, takes on an intimate quality, addressing individuals as if from within their own psychic space. This intimacy blurs the distinction between personal and political, making the collective appear as an extension of the self. The banal reproduction of such images and voices reinforces this identification, embedding it within the rhythms of everyday life.

The binding of contradictions further enhances the appeal of fascism. By combining elements that would otherwise remain opposed—modernity and tradition, elitism and populism, masculinity and femininity—it creates a flexible framework capable of accommodating diverse desires. This flexibility does not resolve contradictions but contains them, allowing them to coexist without destabilizing the system. The banal operates here as a stabilizing force, smoothing over tensions through repetition and normalization, ensuring that contradictions do not become points of rupture. This capacity for binding is inseparable from the process of splitting, in which undesirable elements are projected onto external groups. The construction of enemies serves to consolidate internal unity, defining the boundaries of the collective through exclusion. The repetition of these distinctions reinforces their legitimacy, transforming them into self-evident truths. The banal language that accompanies this process reduces complex social relations to simple oppositions, facilitating identification while obscuring the mechanisms that produce it. The interplay between aesthetic form, technological mediation, and psychological dynamics reveals fascism as a system of reproduction, continuously generating the conditions of its own persistence. It does not rely solely on coercion but on the integration of its principles into the fabric of everyday life. The banal becomes the medium through which this integration occurs, embedding ideology within routine practices and familiar forms. What appears as spontaneous identification is in fact the result of sustained repetition, a process that naturalizes what is historically and politically constructed.

To understand this process is to recognize that fascism cannot be reduced to a set of doctrines or historical events. It is a mode of organizing perception and desire, a way of aligning individuals with collective structures through the manipulation of forms and symbols. Its danger lies not only in its explicit manifestations but in its capacity to operate within the ordinary, to reproduce itself through the banal without appearing as ideology. Extending this insight further, one can see how the reproduction of banality functions as a broader mechanism within modern systems of communication. The circulation of fragmented images, the repetition of simplified narratives, and the normalization of mediated experience create conditions in which complex realities are reduced to manageable forms. Within these conditions, the distinction between aesthetic and political becomes increasingly blurred, as both operate through similar processes of representation and repetition. Thus, the study of fascism as a reproduction of banality reveals a deeper continuity between cultural forms and political structures. It shows how the ordinary can be mobilized to sustain systems of power, how fragmentation can be transformed into unity through controlled recombination, and how the banal can serve as the vehicle for the most profound transformations of perception and identity. In confronting these dynamics, one is compelled to move beyond surface explanations and to engage with the underlying processes that shape how reality is experienced and understood.

Kaplan, A. Y. (1986) Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Banality as Method: From Mediocrity to Mechanism

In Alice Yaeger Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life, the effort to rethink banality marks a decisive shift from its conventional association with intellectual emptiness toward an understanding of it as a cultural and ideological mechanism, one that operates not through deficiency but through repetition, embedding, and everyday circulation. The problem is not whether fascism is banal in the sense of being trivial, but how banality itself functions as a mode of power, shaping perception and sustaining ideological structures without requiring explicit articulation.

The familiar point of departure is Hannah Arendt's formulation, where banality designates a lack—an absence of imagination, a failure of thought, a mediocrity that allows individuals to participate in systems of destruction without fully grasping their implications. Eichmann becomes the emblem of this condition, his speech composed of clichés, his actions guided by formula, his identity defined by bureaucratic function. In this framework, banality appears as a negative category, indicating what is missing rather than what is present. The danger lies in the void where reflection should be. Yet this interpretation, while powerful, narrows the scope of analysis. By framing banality as a deficiency, it risks overlooking the ways in which it actively produces effects. The reduction of fascism to mediocrity obscures the complexity of its appeal, particularly its aesthetic and cultural dimensions. It suggests that ideology operates in the absence of depth, rather than through specific forms that organize experience and desire. What is required is a shift from absence to operation, from what banality lacks to what it does. Walter Benjamin's perspective enables this shift by redefining banality as a structural feature rather than a personal limitation. In his reading, the banal is not an accidental byproduct of fascist discourse but one of its primary instruments. The repetition of simplified, often crude expressions does not weaken ideology; it stabilizes it. Through constant circulation, these expressions become familiar, and through familiarity, they become unquestioned. The banal thus functions as a mechanism of normalization, integrating extreme ideas into the everyday without provoking resistance.

This redefinition alters the way fascist texts and practices are approached. Instead of dismissing them as intellectually impoverished, it becomes necessary to examine how their very simplicity contributes to their effectiveness. The slogan, the stereotype, the repeated image—these are not secondary elements but central components of ideological work. They condense complex structures into accessible forms, allowing them to circulate widely and persist over time. The banal becomes the vehicle through which ideology moves, adapting to different contexts while maintaining its core patterns. The significance of this mechanism becomes clearer when attention is directed toward everyday life. Fascism does not operate only through grand events or official declarations; it permeates the mundane, shaping how individuals inhabit space, experience time, and relate to objects and technologies. The fascination with modern devices, the organization of domestic environments, the representation of ideal communities—all these elements participate in the construction of a lived ideology. They translate abstract principles into concrete practices, embedding them within the routines of daily existence. The example of the domestic interior, organized around efficiency and technological convenience, illustrates how ideology intersects with material culture. The arrangement of objects, the emphasis on order and functionality, the integration of media devices into everyday life—all contribute to a vision of modern existence that

aligns with broader ideological goals. The banal detail becomes a point of entry into larger structures, revealing how the ordinary can serve as a site of ideological formation.

This focus on the everyday also highlights the importance of context. In France, where fascism did not achieve the same level of institutional consolidation as in other countries, its development remained closely tied to cultural and intellectual production. This prolonged phase allowed for the exploration of its aesthetic dimensions, the articulation of its utopian aspirations, and the refinement of its symbolic forms. The absence of a fully realized state apparatus did not weaken fascism but preserved its capacity for experimentation, allowing its banal elements to evolve in relation to broader cultural trends. The tension between national specificity and transnational alignment further complicates this picture. French fascist writers engaged with models from other contexts while attempting to articulate a distinct identity. This engagement produced a hybrid discourse, one that combined local traditions with imported forms. The banal played a crucial role in this process, providing a flexible medium through which different elements could be integrated and adapted. Its capacity for repetition and variation made it an ideal vehicle for the circulation of ideas across boundaries. The theoretical implications of this approach extend beyond the study of fascism. By reconceptualizing banality as a mechanism rather than a deficiency, it becomes possible to analyze how ideology operates in other contexts as well. The repetition of familiar forms, the normalization of particular expressions, the integration of abstract principles into everyday practices—these processes are not unique to fascism but are characteristic of modern systems of communication and power. The banal becomes a general condition under which meaning is produced and maintained.

This perspective also reframes the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The aestheticization of everyday life, often associated with modernity, provides the conditions under which ideological forms can be embedded within ordinary experience. The boundary between artistic expression and political discourse becomes porous, as both rely on similar mechanisms of representation and repetition. The banal, situated at this intersection, facilitates the movement between these domains, allowing aesthetic forms to carry political significance and political ideas to assume aesthetic qualities. To develop a theory of fascist banality, then, is to recognize that ideology does not reside solely in explicit statements or formal doctrines. It is distributed across practices, objects, and representations, sustained by the continuous reproduction of familiar forms. The banal is not an obstacle to understanding but a key to it, revealing how systems of meaning are constructed and maintained at the level of everyday life. Thus, the shift from Arendt's emphasis on mediocrity to Benjamin's focus on mechanism opens a new analytical horizon. It allows for a more nuanced account of how fascism operates, one that acknowledges both its cultural complexity and its capacity for integration into ordinary experience. By attending to the banal, one uncovers the processes through which ideology becomes lived, how it moves from abstraction to practice, and how it persists through repetition even in the absence of overt institutional support.

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The Empire of the Ordinary: Banality as Colonial Condition

In Saikat Majumdar's Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, the banal ceases to be merely a deficiency of experience and emerges instead as a historical condition, a structural effect of colonial modernity in which the ordinary becomes both the symptom of marginalization and the medium of literary transformation. The unwritten story imagined by Katherine Mansfield, with its figure suspended between the colonial periphery and the imperial center, crystallizes this condition: the colony appears as a space of repetition and stasis, while the metropolis promises movement, density, and meaning. Yet this promise remains perpetually deferred, producing a tension that shapes both narrative form and affective experience.

The opposition between barrenness and fullness, so central to this imagination, is not simply geographical but temporal and existential. The colonial subject inhabits a present that seems emptied of event, a time marked by recurrence rather than progression. In contrast, the imperial center is figured as the site of history, where change, crisis, and creativity unfold. This asymmetry generates a specific form of consciousness, one defined by distance—not only spatial but also experiential. The banal is thus not the absence of content but the result of uneven distribution, where the rhythms of life are structured by exclusion from the circuits of significance. Within this framework, banality becomes a narrative principle. It organizes the relationship between the everyday and the desire for transcendence, between the immediate and the imagined. The ordinary does not simply persist; it imposes itself, creating a condition in which the possibility of escape is constantly evoked but never realized. This condition produces boredom, not as a trivial emotion but as an index of structural limitation, a response to the confinement of experience within repetitive forms. The banal, in this sense, is inseparable from its affective counterpart, forming a pair that defines the texture of colonial life. Yet this apparent limitation becomes, paradoxically, a source of aesthetic innovation. By foregrounding the ordinary, modernist and postcolonial writers transform what might seem inert into a dynamic field of tension. The failure of transcendence does not halt narrative; it propels it, creating a movement driven by frustration and desire. The banal is reconfigured as a force, shaping the contours of literary form by resisting closure and resolution. What emerges is not a rejection of the ordinary but its revaluation, an attempt to uncover within it the traces of a larger structure.

This revaluation challenges traditional aesthetic hierarchies, which privilege intensity, originality, and dramatic transformation. Banality, defined by its refusal of these qualities, occupies an oppositional position. It signals the limits of aesthetic ambition, the point at which narrative encounters the constraints of the real. However, in the context of colonial modernity, this opposition becomes productive. The denial of transcendence exposes the conditions that make such transcendence desirable, revealing the political and cultural hierarchies that underlie aesthetic expectations. The incorporation of noncathartic affects further intensifies this dynamic. Emotions such as boredom, irritation, and envy do not lead to resolution; they persist, accumulating without release. Their presence disrupts the narrative arc, preventing the closure that would restore coherence. These affects are not incidental but integral to the representation of colonial experience, capturing the tension between aspiration and limitation. Through them, the banal acquires a new significance, becoming a register of lived contradiction rather than mere absence. The relationship between modernism and the everyday is thus marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, modernist writers seek to transcend the limitations of realist representation, moving beyond the accumulation of detail toward a more fragmentary and affective mode. On the other hand, their work remains deeply entangled with the materiality of everyday life. The ordinary cannot be abandoned; it must be transformed. This transformation does not eliminate banality but reconfigures it, turning it into a site where meaning is negotiated rather than given.

In colonial contexts, this ambivalence is further complicated by the political dimension of banality. The ordinary is not neutral; it reflects the structures of power that shape daily life. The repetitive rhythms of the colony mirror its marginal position within the imperial system, where access to movement and change is restricted. The banal thus becomes a marker of disempowerment, a sign of the limits imposed by a global hierarchy. At the same time, it offers a vantage point from which these limits can be perceived and articulated. The work of writers such as Joyce and Mansfield exemplifies this duality. Their narratives do not simply depict the ordinary; they probe its structure, revealing the tensions that sustain it. The deflated moments of realization, the incomplete epiphanies, the persistent sense of waiting—all these elements contribute to a poetics in which the banal becomes a driving force. The absence of resolution does not diminish the narrative; it defines it, creating a form that reflects the conditions of its production. This approach extends into postcolonial literature, where the legacy of colonial modernity continues to shape experience. The banal remains central, not as a residue of the past but as an ongoing condition. Writers engage with it as both constraint and possibility, exploring how the ordinary can be reimagined in ways that challenge dominant frameworks. The banal becomes a site of resistance, not through dramatic opposition but through subtle reconfiguration, through the exposure of its own limits.

In this broader perspective, the poetics of the prosaic reveals a fundamental transformation in the understanding of literature. The focus shifts from exceptional events to everyday conditions, from transcendence to immanence, from resolution to persistence. The banal is no longer a problem to be overcome but a resource to be explored, a means of engaging with the complexities of modernity and its uneven distribution. Extending this insight further, one can see how the grammar of banality operates across different domains of experience, linking the colonial condition to broader patterns of repetition and normalization. The structures that produce the ordinary in colonial contexts are not entirely distinct from those that shape everyday life elsewhere. They differ in degree and form, but they share a common logic, one that organizes experience through repetition and limits through normalization. The banal thus becomes a key to understanding not only the margins of empire but the conditions of modern life more generally. Thus, the banality of empire is not a secondary feature but a central element of its operation. It defines how power is experienced, how time is structured, and how desire is articulated. By transforming this condition into a site of aesthetic inquiry, modernist and postcolonial writers reveal its complexity, showing how the ordinary can both constrain and enable, how it can reflect structures of domination while also providing the means to question them. In this transformation, the banal becomes not the end of narrative possibility but its beginning, a point from which new forms of expression can emerge.

Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Universal Ordinary: Banality as the Hidden Grammar of Modernity

In Saikat Majumdar's Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, the banal emerges not as an incidental feature of experience but as a defining structure of modernity itself, a condition that links Enlightenment rationality to modernist experimentation through the shared terrain of the everyday. What appears at first as a simple attention to ordinary life unfolds into a complex historical formation, where banality and boredom become the affective and aesthetic signatures of a world increasingly organized by abstraction, exclusion, and repetition. The banal is no longer a residue of failed meaning; it is the very medium through which modernity becomes perceptible.

The distinction between modernity and modernism is crucial to this transformation. Modernity, grounded in Enlightenment ideals, seeks to order the world through reason, coherence, and universality, translating the complexity of life into systems of intelligibility. Modernism, emerging later, inherits this project but also destabilizes it, exposing the fractures within its apparent unity. The everyday becomes the site of this tension: it is both the object of Enlightenment realism and the point at which that realism begins to break down. The banal thus occupies a paradoxical position, sustaining the project of representation while simultaneously undermining its assumptions. This paradox is inscribed in the very language through which the banal is understood. The etymological trajectory of the term reveals a shift from obligation to evaluation, from what is shared and compulsory to what is dismissed as trivial. What was once common by necessity becomes common by redundancy, stripped of distinction and reduced to repetition. This transformation mirrors the broader movement of modernity, where communal structures give way to individual experience, and where the ordinary becomes both the ground of identity and the site of its diminishment. A similar transformation occurs in the emergence of boredom as a defining affect of modern life. Initially tied to mechanical motion, suggesting monotony and inertia, boredom evolves into a psychological condition that reflects the disjunction between expectation and experience. It signals not simply a lack of stimulation but a deeper estrangement, a sense of being caught within structures that limit agency while maintaining the appearance of participation. In this sense, boredom becomes an index of modern subjectivity, revealing the constraints imposed by systems that promise freedom while organizing experience in repetitive forms.

The rise of the novel as a dominant literary form is inseparable from this reconfiguration of the ordinary. By turning away from the transcendence of earlier narrative traditions and embracing the contingencies of everyday life, the novel aligns itself with the material realities of modernity. It captures the rhythms of ordinary existence, the interplay of necessity and chance, the persistence of the mundane. Yet this alignment also introduces a tension, as the representation of the banal exposes the limits of narrative itself. The absence of transcendence becomes both a thematic concern and a formal challenge. Modernist writers respond to this challenge by transforming the banal into a site of experimentation. Rather than seeking to escape the ordinary, they intensify it, exploring its textures and contradictions. The everyday is no longer a neutral backdrop but an active force, shaping the structure of narrative and the experience of reading. Moments that might once have been dismissed as insignificant acquire a new weight, not because they lead to resolution, but because they resist it. The banal becomes a space in which meaning is deferred, fragmented, and reconstituted. This transformation is closely linked to the experience of exclusion that characterizes both modern and colonial contexts. Banality and boredom are not evenly distributed; they are shaped by positions within systems of power. For those at the margins, the ordinary is marked by constraint, by a repetition that reflects limited access to movement and change. Boredom, in this sense, becomes a political affect, signaling the gap between participation and agency. It reveals the conditions under which individuals are subject to structures that they do not control, experiencing their effects without influencing their course.

In colonial settings, this dynamic is intensified by the asymmetry between center and periphery. The banal rhythms of life in the colony are not simply local phenomena; they are produced by global structures that concentrate eventfulness and transformation elsewhere. The ordinary becomes a sign of exclusion, a reminder of distance from the sites where history appears to unfold. Yet it is precisely this condition that generates new forms of narrative engagement, as writers seek to articulate the experience of living within such constraints. The everyday, as theorized by cultural and social thought, provides a framework for understanding these processes. It is not a passive domain but a site of organization, where power operates through routines, habits, and material

arrangements. The notion of organized passivity captures the way in which activity can coexist with constraint, how individuals can be engaged in practices that reproduce the very structures that limit them. The banal is central to this organization, as it normalizes repetition and renders it invisible, integrating it into the fabric of life. Anthropological perspectives extend this analysis by showing how boredom functions as a pervasive condition in contexts marked by exclusion from dominant economic and cultural systems. The experience of waiting, of suspended possibility, of time that does not lead to transformation—these are not merely individual states but collective conditions, shaped by global inequalities. The banal thus becomes a point of convergence between literary representation and lived experience, linking aesthetic forms to social realities.

Yet within this convergence lies the possibility of resistance. By foregrounding the ordinary, writers and thinkers expose the structures that sustain it, revealing the mechanisms through which repetition is maintained. The banal, rather than being accepted as given, becomes an object of scrutiny, a site where the limits of existing systems can be perceived. This scrutiny does not necessarily produce immediate transformation, but it alters the terms of engagement, making visible what had been normalized. In this sense, banality acquires a dual function. It is both a symptom of disempowerment and a resource for critique. Its persistence reflects the stability of the structures that produce it, but its articulation opens a space for questioning those structures. The ordinary becomes a field of tension, where the forces of normalization and resistance intersect. Extending this insight, one can see how the grammar of banality operates as a universal feature of modern life, connecting different contexts through shared patterns of repetition and constraint. While the specific forms of the banal vary, the underlying logic remains consistent, organizing experience in ways that both enable and limit. The study of this logic reveals the deeper connections between aesthetic practice and social structure, showing how the ordinary can serve as a bridge between them.

Thus, the generic modernity of the banal is not a background condition but a central element of the modern experience. It defines how individuals relate to time, space, and power, shaping both perception and expression. By transforming this condition into a focus of inquiry, modernist and postcolonial writers uncover its complexity, demonstrating that the ordinary is not simply what remains when meaning is absent, but what persists when meaning is contested, deferred, and reimagined.

Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Quiet Empire: Banality as the Invisible Architecture of Power

In Saikat Majumdar's Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, the banal emerges as the most subtle yet pervasive expression of imperial power, not in its spectacular displays but in the quiet repetition of everyday life, where domination is neither declared nor dramatized but lived as routine. The literary constellation formed by James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Zoë Wicomb, and Amit Chaudhuri reveals how this condition is not incidental to colonial modernity but constitutive of it. Across different geographies and historical moments, their works transform the ordinary into a diagnostic instrument, exposing how empire organizes not only economies and territories but also time, perception, and affect.

The banal, in this archive, is not merely descriptive; it is structural. It reflects the uneven distribution of modernity itself, where the imperial center accumulates movement, crisis, and transformation, while the periphery is consigned to repetition and stasis. Joyce's Dublin,

Mansfield's New Zealand, Wicomb's South Africa, and Chaudhuri's India are not simply settings but temporal conditions, spaces in which history appears suspended, where life unfolds without the intensity attributed to metropolitan experience. This suspension produces a peculiar narrative energy, one driven not by action but by its absence, not by event but by its deferral. Modernist fiction recognizes and reconfigures this condition. In Joyce and Mansfield, the banal becomes a medium through which the contradictions of modernity are articulated. Their works remain tied to the aesthetic ambitions of European modernism, yet they expose the instability at its core, revealing how the promise of coherence is undermined by the realities of marginality. The ordinary becomes a site where the limits of Enlightenment rationality are encountered, where the attempt to impose order confronts the persistence of contingency and repetition. For Wicomb and Chaudhuri, this engagement takes on a more explicitly critical dimension. Writing from the aftermath of colonial rule, they reject the dominance of spectacle that has often defined postcolonial literature—the focus on revolution, trauma, and national emergence. Instead, they turn toward the ordinary, embracing its inertia and its refusal of dramatic transformation. This choice is not an evasion but a strategy, one that challenges the expectation that literature from the periphery must justify itself through intensity or exceptionality. The banal becomes a form of resistance, a way of asserting the significance of lives that do not conform to the narrative demands of crisis and resolution.

This shift reveals the deeper continuity between modernism and postcolonial writing. While the historical contexts differ, the engagement with banality links them, suggesting that the ordinary is a persistent site of tension within modernity. The critique of Enlightenment ideals, often associated with modernism, is extended and reoriented in postcolonial contexts, where the failures of those ideals are experienced not as abstract contradictions but as material conditions. The banal thus becomes a point of convergence, where aesthetic experimentation intersects with political critique. The cosmopolitan trajectories of these writers further complicate this dynamic. Their movements between center and periphery do not result in a simple embrace of metropolitan culture but produce a layered perspective, one that remains anchored in the spaces they have left behind. The periphery is not abandoned; it is reimagined, filtered through memory, distance, and displacement. This reimagining transforms the banal into a site of reflection, where the local is understood in relation to global structures. The ordinary becomes a repository of history, carrying within it the traces of colonial relations that continue to shape experience. Yet this cosmopolitanism is marked by an asymmetry that cannot be ignored. The mobility of the writer contrasts with the immobility of the subjects they depict, highlighting the unequal distribution of freedom within the global system. The banal, in this context, becomes an index of constraint, a sign of the limits imposed on those who remain within the structures of the periphery. The repetition of daily life reflects not choice but necessity, a condition in which possibilities are restricted by economic and political forces.

This condition is sharply illuminated in the contrast between the tourist and the native, where the same environment is experienced in radically different ways. What appears as picturesque or pleasurable to the visitor is experienced as monotonous and limiting by the inhabitant. The banal thus reveals its relational nature, shaped by position and perspective. It is not an intrinsic quality of a place but a function of power, determined by who has the capacity to move, to choose, and to transform their surroundings. Within the narratives of these writers, this relational banality becomes a source of both constraint and critique. In Joyce and Mansfield, it reflects the paralysis of colonial life, the sense of being caught within structures that resist change. In Wicomb and Chaudhuri, it becomes a means of questioning the narratives that have dominated postcolonial discourse, exposing the limitations of both colonial and nationalist frameworks. The ordinary is not celebrated uncritically; it is examined as a site where power operates and where its effects can

be traced. The turn toward the everyday also marks a broader transformation in literary priorities. The emphasis shifts from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from the dramatic to the repetitive, from the visible to the barely perceptible. This shift does not diminish the scope of literature but expands it, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with the conditions of life under empire and its aftermath. The banal becomes a space where the complexities of modernity can be explored without the distortion introduced by spectacle.

Extending this perspective, one can see how the banality of empire functions as a general condition of modern life, not limited to colonial contexts but intensified within them. The structures that produce repetition and constraint are present in different forms across the modern world, organizing experience in ways that often go unnoticed. The colonial and postcolonial contexts make these structures more visible, revealing their effects with greater clarity. The banal thus becomes a lens through which the broader dynamics of modernity can be understood. The aestheticization of this condition does not neutralize its political significance; it amplifies it. By transforming the ordinary into a site of inquiry, these writers make visible what might otherwise remain obscured. The banal becomes a form of knowledge, a way of apprehending the subtle operations of power that shape everyday life. It reveals how empire persists not only in institutions and policies but in habits, perceptions, and affects. Thus, the banality of empire is not a secondary aspect of colonial modernity but its most enduring form. It is through the ordinary that power is maintained, through repetition that it becomes normalized, and through the everyday that it is experienced. By attending to this dimension, the works of Joyce, Mansfield, Wicomb, and Chaudhuri redefine the relationship between literature and history, showing how the smallest details of life can illuminate the largest structures of power.

Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press.

Refusal in the Ordinary: Joyce and the Aesthetics of Paralysis

In Saikat Majumdar's Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, James Joyce emerges as a writer who does not escape banality but inhabits it so completely that it becomes the very condition of artistic refusal. The disappearance of epic heroism and romantic transcendence in modern life does not signal, for Joyce, the end of drama but its displacement into the most unremarkable corners of existence. The ordinary clerk, the dim domestic interior, the repetitive gesture—these are no longer marginal details but the very stage upon which modern life unfolds. The banal is not the absence of narrative; it is its hidden infrastructure.

In Dubliners, this infrastructure is rendered through figures whose lives are defined by suspension rather than movement. Little Chandler embodies this condition with particular clarity. His existence, caught between clerical routine and unrealized literary ambition, reflects a deeper paralysis rooted in the colonial condition. His longing for London, mediated through the figure of Gallaher, appears as a desire for escape, for entry into a world where life is eventful and meaningful. Yet this desire is already compromised, shaped by the very structures it seeks to transcend. The metropolis is imagined not as a real place but as a projection, a screen upon which the colonial subject inscribes fantasies of recognition and transformation. The encounter between Chandler and Gallaher exposes the fragility of this projection. Gallaher's apparent success, marked by style and confidence, dissolves under closer scrutiny, revealing a superficiality that mirrors Chandler's own illusions. The metropolitan promise is shown to be hollow, not because it lacks opportunity, but because it reproduces the same structures of appearance and validation that define

the periphery. The distinction between center and margin begins to blur, revealing itself as a relational construct sustained by desire rather than substance.

This dynamic is inseparable from the tension between labor and action, where the demands of everyday survival constrain the possibility of self-expression. The routines that sustain life simultaneously inhibit the capacity to transform it. Chandler's poetic aspirations are not simply thwarted by circumstance; they are absorbed into it, rendered indistinguishable from the very conditions they seek to escape. The banal thus becomes both obstacle and medium, a force that limits action while providing the material from which it might emerge. Joyce's treatment of this condition is marked by a profound irony. The periphery is not merely a site of deprivation but a space in which the illusions of the center are exposed. The colonial subject's complicity in these illusions is crucial, as it reveals how power operates not only through external domination but through internalized expectations. Chandler's desire to be recognized as a melancholic figure by English critics exemplifies this complicity, showing how identity is shaped by the gaze of the other. The banal, in this sense, is not neutral; it is structured by relations of recognition and misrecognition. Stephen Dedalus represents a more conscious engagement with this structure. His movement between Dublin and Europe is not a simple trajectory of escape but a process of negotiation, in which the limitations of both periphery and center are acknowledged. The challenge he confronts is not how to leave the banal behind, but how to transform it into a new aesthetic form. This transformation does not eliminate the ordinary; it intensifies it, making it the locus of artistic experimentation. The banal becomes a resource, a field in which new possibilities of expression can be forged.

This reconfiguration reaches its fullest articulation in Joyce's use of the epiphany, where moments of revelation emerge from the most trivial objects and situations. The significance of these moments lies not in their transcendence but in their immanence, in their capacity to disclose meaning within the ordinary. The banal object is not elevated beyond itself; it is revealed in its own density, its own irreducible presence. This shift challenges traditional aesthetic hierarchies, which privilege the extraordinary over the ordinary, and redefines the conditions under which meaning can appear. Yet the epiphany in Joyce's later work becomes increasingly unstable. The moment of recognition is no longer guaranteed; it may fail, fragment, or remain inaccessible. The example of Maria in Clay illustrates this shift, where the object encountered resists interpretation, remaining opaque and unresolved. This opacity introduces a new dimension to the banal, one in which meaning is not simply hidden but fundamentally indeterminate. The relationship between subject and object is disrupted, opening a space in which the ordinary cannot be fully assimilated to understanding. This disruption extends to Joyce's critique of historicism. The grand narratives that seek to impose coherence on history are undermined by the fleeting and fragmentary nature of everyday experience. The banal becomes a counterpoint to these narratives, exposing their limitations by foregrounding what they exclude. The transient moment, the insignificant detail, the repetitive routine—these elements resist incorporation into linear histories, revealing the multiplicity and contingency that such histories suppress.

Stephen's rejection of teleological history, his insistence on awakening from its nightmare, reflects this shift. History is no longer a coherent progression but a field of discontinuities, where meaning is neither given nor stable. The banal plays a crucial role in this reconfiguration, as it embodies the persistence of the ordinary against the abstraction of grand narratives. It anchors experience in the present, in the immediate, resisting the pull of overarching explanations. Extending this insight, one can see how Joyce's aesthetics of banality operates as a broader critique of modernity. The structures that produce repetition and constraint are not limited to the colonial context but are

characteristic of modern life more generally. The banal reveals these structures in their most accessible form, making visible the conditions that shape experience. At the same time, it provides the means to challenge them, by transforming the ordinary into a site of reflection and experimentation. Thus, the banality of refusal is not a negation but a strategy. It refuses the terms imposed by both the periphery and the center, by both tradition and modernity, by both realism and transcendence. It insists on the ordinary as the ground of artistic practice, not as a limitation but as a possibility. In this insistence, Joyce redefines the relationship between literature and life, showing how the most unremarkable elements of existence can become the basis for a radical reimagining of narrative form and cultural meaning.

Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press

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A Fourpenny Cosmos: The Defiant Life of the Banal Object

In Saikat Majumdar's Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, the banal object emerges as one of modernism's most subversive inventions, not because it transcends its insignificance, but because it refuses to do so. In James Joyce's Ulysses, the lemon soap carried by Leopold Bloom does not become a symbol in the traditional sense; it persists as matter, as irritation, as scent, as repetition. It is precisely this refusal of elevation that grants it its strange power. The banal object does not reveal a hidden truth—it exposes the very expectation that objects must reveal one.

The shift toward such objects marks a decisive break in aesthetic history. Where classical traditions privileged the ideal and suppressed the detail, modernity, through processes of democratization and material expansion, redirects attention toward the minute, the peripheral, the overlooked. The detail becomes not merely decorative but constitutive, shaping the texture of narrative itself. In this transformation, the banal object acquires a new status: it is no longer subordinate to meaning but becomes a site where meaning is both generated and resisted. Joyce's method of symbolic naturalism intensifies this tension. The ethnographic density of Dublin life, rendered through an accumulation of objects, gestures, and sensations, coexists with moments that gesture toward symbolic excess. Yet these moments never stabilize into a coherent system. The lemon soap exemplifies this instability. It appears, disappears, irritates, perfumes, mutates into hallucination, and finally returns to its function. Its trajectory resists narrative integration, refusing to become either purely utilitarian or fully symbolic. It occupies a space between these categories, where meaning is continually deferred. This deferral is central to the logic of the banal. The object's persistence across different contexts—funeral carriage, wandering body, surreal vision—creates a continuity that is not grounded in significance but in repetition. The soap does not accumulate meaning; it accumulates presence. Its recurrence marks time, not as progression, but as variation within sameness. The banal object thus becomes a temporal device, structuring the narrative through cycles rather than developments.

The coexistence of the soap with other objects in Bloom's possession further complicates its role. The potato, carrying historical and emotional weight, gestures toward a symbolic density that the soap refuses. The missing key introduces absence, a disruption of domestic order. Together, these elements form a constellation in which different modes of meaning—symbolic, material, and

negative—interact without resolving into a unified structure. The banal object does not stand alone; it participates in a network that destabilizes the boundaries between significance and insignificance. At the level of political economy, the soap's status as a commodity introduces another dimension. It is an object defined by exchange, by its circulation within a system that assigns value through price rather than meaning. Its displacement from its intended use reflects a broader disjunction between production and experience, characteristic of late colonial capitalism. The object is both integrated into and estranged from this system, mirroring Bloom's own ambivalent position within the structures of consumption. The banal thus reveals the tensions inherent in a world where objects are simultaneously functional, symbolic, and commodified. The surreal transformation of the soap in the Circe episode intensifies this ambivalence. When the object speaks, when it aligns itself with cosmic forces, the gesture is not one of genuine transcendence but of parody. The inflation of the banal into the sublime exposes the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, showing how easily the ordinary can be elevated—and how fragile such elevation is. The banal object resists this inflation by returning, inevitably, to its material condition.

Joyce's attention to such objects parallels an ethnographic impulse, a desire to capture the imponderabilia of everyday life. The accumulation of details—wrappers, utensils, smells, textures—creates a dense field in which the ordinary is not background but substance. This approach aligns literature with emerging anthropological methods, where the significance of a culture is sought not in its grand narratives but in its smallest practices. The banal object becomes a point of entry into this field, a fragment that carries within it the traces of a larger structure. Bloom's movement through the city situates this field within a specific spatial experience. His wandering does not follow a clear trajectory; it unfolds through encounters, interruptions, and returns. The banal object accompanies this movement, marking it without directing it. The city is not organized around landmarks of significance but around points of contact, where objects and sensations intersect with thought. The banal thus participates in a form of spatial narration, where meaning emerges from proximity rather than hierarchy. This reconfiguration of narrative has broader implications for the understanding of modernity. The dominance of the banal object signals a shift from a world organized by ideals to one structured by immanence. Transcendence is no longer the primary horizon; instead, attention is directed toward the density of the present, toward the material conditions that shape experience. The banal object embodies this shift, grounding narrative in the ordinary while revealing its complexity.

At the same time, the refusal of the banal object to fully yield meaning introduces a form of resistance. It challenges the expectation that everything must be interpretable, that every detail must serve a larger purpose. The soap's opacity, its persistence without resolution, disrupts the reader's desire for coherence. It insists on the autonomy of the material, on the possibility that not all elements can be subsumed under a system of meaning. Extending this insight, one can see how the banal object functions as a microcosm of the broader dynamics of colonial modernity. Its circulation, its displacement, its partial integration into systems of value—all reflect the conditions of a world shaped by uneven development and fragmented experience. The object does not represent these conditions; it enacts them, embodying their contradictions in its own trajectory. Thus, the fourpenny soap becomes something more than a narrative detail. It is a point at which different forces—economic, aesthetic, temporal, and perceptual—intersect without resolving. It exemplifies a form of writing in which the ordinary is not transcended but intensified, where the smallest object can carry the weight of an entire structure precisely because it refuses to become a symbol of it. In this refusal lies its radical potential: the banal object does not elevate itself to meaning; it exposes the conditions under which meaning is demanded at all.

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2. EVILNESS OF BANALITY

The Everyday Texture of Fascist Desire: Banality as Cultural Infrastructure

In Alice Yaeger Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life, the question of fascism is displaced from the realm of explicit doctrine into the subtler terrain of cultural habits, aesthetic preferences, and everyday experience, where ideology does not merely announce itself but circulates through the most ordinary forms of life. The difficulty of writing about fascism, marked by the fear of misinterpretation, reflects the instability of its object: fascism is not only a set of political positions but a diffuse field of desire, embedded in language, perception, and cultural production. To approach it requires a method capable of attending to what appears insignificant, to the banal elements through which ideology is reproduced without declaration.

The rejection of a strictly canonical approach is central to this method. The division between great works and marginal texts obscures the ways in which ideology operates across different levels of cultural production. Canonical works reflect established values, often those that have been retrospectively legitimized, while the literature of defeated or discredited movements remains suppressed or dismissed. Yet it is precisely within this suppressed material that certain ideological formations can be observed in their most direct and unfiltered forms. To ignore these texts is to overlook a crucial dimension of cultural history, one in which the boundaries between literature and politics are less rigid and more revealing. The case of French fascism illustrates the consequences of such repression. The absence of an official fascist regime has allowed for a narrative of disavowal, in which responsibility is displaced onto external forces. This displacement creates a gap between historical reality and collective memory, a space in which uncomfortable elements can be excluded from consideration. The persistence of this gap is evident in the selective visibility of certain narratives, where some representations of the past are amplified while others are silenced. The result is not a simple forgetting but a structured form of amnesia, in which the conditions that allowed fascist ideas to flourish remain insufficiently examined.

Within this context, the dismissal of fascist literature as crude or transparent reveals another form of avoidance. To treat these texts as unworthy of serious engagement is to miss the ways in which their very banality contributes to their ideological function. The banal is not merely the trivial; it is the shared, the familiar, the domain in which meaning is stabilized through repetition. In this sense, the banality of fascist aesthetics aligns with the broader logic identified by Arendt, where the ordinary becomes the medium through which more profound processes are enacted. The focus shifts from what is said explicitly to how it is embedded within the textures of everyday life. This shift brings into view the relationship between ideology and experience. Fascist writers do not only articulate political positions; they inhabit particular rhythms of time, engage with specific spaces, and respond to the technological environment of their era. Their fascination with flight, radio, or film is not incidental but indicative of a broader orientation toward modernity, one that seeks to integrate technological innovation into a vision of collective unity. These engagements reveal how

ideology is lived, how it shapes perception and organizes attention. The banal becomes the site where these processes are most visible, precisely because it appears least significant. The analogy with screen memories provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. Just as seemingly trivial recollections can conceal deeper psychological structures, so too can everyday practices reveal underlying ideological formations. The repeated motifs of fascist discourse—youth, vitality, community, leadership—function as condensed expressions of more complex desires and anxieties. They do not simply represent these elements but transform them into accessible and repeatable forms, allowing them to circulate widely and persist over time.

This perspective challenges traditional approaches that prioritize explicit statements and formal doctrines. By focusing on the unofficial and the mundane, it becomes possible to trace how ideology permeates different layers of cultural life. The fascination with slogans, the aestheticization of the body, the idealization of communal belonging—these elements operate not only at the level of propaganda but within the ordinary experiences of individuals. They shape how people see themselves and others, how they interpret their environment, and how they relate to broader social structures. The persistence of these elements across different contexts suggests that fascism cannot be understood as a discrete historical episode. Its ideological components reappear in new forms, embedded within changing cultural practices. The banal serves as the mechanism of this persistence, enabling the repetition and adaptation of key motifs without requiring explicit continuity. What is reproduced is not the original form but its underlying structure, translated into the language and conditions of the present. This reproduction is closely tied to the interplay between repression and return. The marginalization of fascist texts does not eliminate their influence; it displaces it, allowing it to reemerge in indirect ways. The absence of direct engagement creates a space in which certain ideas can circulate without being fully recognized, embedded within other forms of discourse. The banal facilitates this process by providing a neutral surface onto which these elements can be projected, making them appear as part of the ordinary rather than as remnants of a discredited ideology.

Extending this analysis, one can see how the grammar of banality operates as a broader cultural infrastructure. It organizes the circulation of meanings, stabilizes patterns of perception, and enables the integration of contradictory elements into coherent experiences. Within this framework, ideology does not need to assert itself overtly; it can rely on the repetition of familiar forms to maintain its presence. The everyday becomes the medium through which larger structures are sustained, linking individual experience to collective patterns. The implication of this approach is that the study of fascism must move beyond the search for explicit declarations and focus on the conditions that make such declarations possible and effective. It requires attention to the subtle ways in which desire, perception, and language are shaped by cultural practices, and to the role of the banal in sustaining these processes. By examining how ideology is embedded in the ordinary, it becomes possible to understand its persistence and its capacity to adapt to new contexts. Thus, the reproduction of banality reveals fascism as a phenomenon that operates not only through grand narratives and political actions but through the everyday textures of life. It shows how the ordinary can become the site of ideological formation, how repetition can sustain complex structures of meaning, and how the banal can function as both a mask and a mechanism for the persistence of ideas that might otherwise appear to belong to the past.

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The Engine of Contradiction: Fascism as a Machine of Banal Synthesis

In Alice Yaeger Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life, the analysis of what she calls the polarity machine reveals fascism not as a coherent ideology but as a dynamic system capable of absorbing and reconciling contradictions, transforming them into a continuous source of symbolic energy. The opposition between modern and antimodern, often used to categorize intellectual movements, collapses within this system, not because it is resolved, but because it is rendered operational. Fascism does not choose between past and future; it consumes both, converting their tension into a mechanism of appeal.

The distinction between modernist experimentation and antimodern nostalgia appears, at first, to provide a stable framework for understanding fascist writers. On one side stand the figures associated with rupture, fragmentation, and urban alienation; on the other, those who idealize tradition, hierarchy, and rootedness. Yet this opposition proves inadequate when confronted with the fluidity of fascist discourse. The same texts that evoke medieval imagery also celebrate technological innovation, and the same rhetoric that condemns modern decay embraces the instruments of modern power. The categories begin to dissolve, revealing not inconsistency but a deliberate strategy of synthesis. This synthesis is facilitated by the instability of the very terms that define it. Modernity, modernism, and modernization do not refer to a single, unified process but to overlapping and often conflicting developments in aesthetics, politics, and economics. Fascism exploits this ambiguity, moving between different meanings of the modern to construct a narrative that is both critical and celebratory. The pastoral ideal and the machine do not cancel each other out; they coexist as elements within a larger symbolic framework that promises both return and transformation. The adaptability of racist ideology further intensifies this process. By associating its targets with both archaic conspiracies and contemporary crises, it dissolves temporal distinctions, presenting the same enemy as both ancient and modern. This temporal fluidity undermines any attempt to locate fascism within a specific historical orientation. It becomes at once reactionary and progressive, rooted in the past and oriented toward the future, capable of mobilizing different forms of anxiety and desire within a single narrative.

The result is a system in which contradiction is not a weakness but a resource. Fascist rhetoric thrives on juxtaposition, placing incompatible elements side by side in a way that generates a sense of totality. The longing for a lost community is combined with the excitement of technological advancement; the rejection of liberal fragmentation is paired with the embrace of mass communication. This combination produces an affective coherence that does not depend on logical consistency. The banal plays a crucial role here, as the repetition of these combinations normalizes their coexistence, making the contradictions appear natural rather than problematic. Walter Benjamin's insight into the aestheticization of politics provides a key to understanding this mechanism. By transforming political and technological realities into objects of aesthetic experience, fascism removes them from the domain of practical evaluation. War becomes spectacle, machinery becomes symbol, and destruction is reimagined as creation. This transformation does not eliminate the material consequences of these phenomena but reframes them in a way that obscures their ethical implications. The aesthetic surface absorbs the shock of contradiction, presenting it as a unified experience. Media technologies amplify this effect by enabling the continuous circulation of images and sounds that reinforce the system's logic. Radio broadcasts, cinematic sequences, and mass rallies create environments in which individuals experience themselves as part of a larger whole. The fragmentation inherent in these media is reassembled into narratives of unity, producing a sense of participation that masks the underlying structure of control. The individual is both spectator and participant, positioned within a system that offers visibility while directing perception.

The notion of totality emerges from this interplay of elements. Fascism presents itself as a comprehensive solution, capable of integrating all aspects of life into a single framework. This totality is not achieved through the elimination of difference but through its management, through the continuous binding of opposites into a coherent field of meaning. The polarity machine operates by maintaining tension while preventing rupture, ensuring that contradictions contribute to the system's stability rather than undermining it. Jean-Pierre Faye's concept of cross-pollination captures the political dimension of this process, showing how fascism appropriates elements from different ideological traditions to expand its appeal. Revolutionary language is combined with conservative goals, populist rhetoric with elitist structures. This blending allows fascism to address diverse audiences, offering each a reflection of their concerns within a larger narrative. The banal repetition of these hybrid forms reinforces their legitimacy, embedding them within the everyday language of politics and culture. The illusion of participation further strengthens this system. Media representations create the impression that individuals are actively engaged in the construction of the collective, even as their roles are defined and limited by the structure of representation. The declaration of presence, the assertion of being everywhere, transforms the individual into a node within the network of the state, simultaneously empowered and absorbed. This duality is central to the appeal of fascism, as it offers both recognition and belonging while maintaining hierarchical control.

Extending this analysis, one can see how the polarity machine reflects a broader grammar of banality in which repetition and normalization allow contradictions to persist without resolution. The continual circulation of opposing elements creates a dynamic equilibrium, where tension is sustained but never allowed to disrupt the system. The banal operates as the medium through which this equilibrium is maintained, transforming inconsistency into familiarity and complexity into routine. This mechanism has implications beyond the specific historical context of fascism. It reveals how systems of meaning can incorporate difference without losing coherence, how they can adapt to changing conditions while preserving their underlying structure. The ability to bind opposites, to convert conflict into continuity, is not unique to fascism but is a feature of modern systems of communication and power. The study of this process thus provides insight into the ways in which ideology operates at the level of everyday experience. To confront the polarity machine is to recognize that the appeal of such systems lies not in their clarity but in their capacity to accommodate ambiguity. The fusion of opposites offers a sense of completeness that is both seductive and stabilizing, masking the tensions that sustain it. The challenge is not only to expose these contradictions but to understand how they function, how they are reproduced through language, media, and perception.

Thus, fascism appears not as a static doctrine but as a dynamic process of synthesis, a machine that converts difference into unity through the banal repetition of its forms. Its power lies in its ability to transform contradiction into coherence, to present the incompatible as complementary, and to embed this presentation within the ordinary structures of experience. In this way, the polarity machine becomes a model for understanding how the banal operates as a force of stabilization, ensuring the persistence of systems that might otherwise collapse under the weight of their own inconsistencies.

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Against the Silence of Files: The Deliberate Craft of Evil

In Yaacov Lozowick's Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil, the familiar image of the ordinary perpetrator dissolves under the weight of historical detail, revealing not passive functionaries but agents whose actions were sustained by intention, adaptation, and a chilling proximity to the suffering they helped produce. The quiet conversation described by Christopher Browning, where a policeman exchanges casual words with a man about to be executed, does not testify to the absence of awareness but to its containment within a structure that allows the unimaginable to coexist with the routine. The gesture is not empty; it is a sign of a world in which the extraordinary has been absorbed into the ordinary without losing its meaning.

The lives of the perpetrators reinforce this unsettling continuity. They inhabited familiar rhythms, attending to careers, families, and reputations, while simultaneously participating in systematic destruction. This coexistence does not indicate a lack of engagement with their actions but rather a division that permits different registers of life to operate without interference. The administrative task and the human consequence occupy separate domains, connected in fact but separated in experience. The bureaucratic framework does not erase knowledge; it organizes it, distributing responsibility in ways that make direct confrontation unnecessary. Lozowick challenges the tendency to interpret such conditions through the lens of banality understood as thoughtlessness. The evidence suggests that these individuals were not detached from the implications of their work. They planned operations, responded to logistical obstacles, and refined methods with a precision that indicates sustained attention. Their actions required coordination, foresight, and commitment, qualities that contradict the notion of passive compliance. What emerges is not a picture of absence but of presence, a form of engagement directed toward destructive ends. The inadequacy of language becomes central to this critique. Academic and bureaucratic vocabularies struggle to capture the immediacy of suffering, replacing cries and resistance with categories and procedures. The distance created by such language does not simply obscure reality; it transforms it into a form that can be managed without emotional disruption. When the screams of victims are excluded from discourse, what remains is a sanitized representation that risks diminishing the intentionality of those who caused them. The gap between lived experience and its description becomes a space in which responsibility can be diluted.

Survivor testimony introduces a counterpoint to this abstraction. Figures such as Hans Günter Adler reject the characterization of perpetrators as ordinary, insisting on their awareness and their active role in sustaining the system. This perspective restores a dimension that is often lost in analytical frameworks: the recognition that those who committed these acts did so with knowledge, even if that knowledge was mediated by ideology and self-interest. The insistence on awareness does not negate the structural conditions that enabled the crimes but emphasizes the role of choice within those conditions. The metaphor of ascent offers a way of rethinking this dynamic. Rather than a gradual slide into wrongdoing, the path toward extreme violence appears as a series of steps that require decision and reinforcement. Each stage involves a further commitment, a deepening alignment with a system that rewards conformity and initiative in equal measure. The image of the alpinist captures this process, suggesting effort, direction, and the accumulation of experience. The summit, in this sense, is not reached accidentally but through sustained movement toward a defined goal. This framing also allows for a reconsideration of resistance. Those who acted against the prevailing system often began within it, sharing its assumptions and practices. Their divergence emerges not from an inherent difference but from a shift in perception, a moment in which the established framework is questioned and re-evaluated. The descent toward compassion mirrors the

ascent toward cruelty, involving its own sequence of decisions and transformations. The distinction between the two paths lies not in initial conditions but in the capacity to alter one's orientation within those conditions.

The tension between these perspectives highlights a fundamental difficulty in understanding the nature of evil. To describe perpetrators as ordinary risks obscuring the intentionality of their actions, while to emphasize their deliberation risks isolating them from the broader structures that made those actions possible. Lozowick's intervention suggests that both dimensions must be held together: the systemic organization that enables violence and the individual engagement that sustains it. Neither alone is sufficient to account for the complexity of what occurred. Extending this insight further, one can see how the grammar of banality operates not only as a condition of repetition but as a framework that can accommodate both thoughtlessness and intention. The routines and procedures that define bureaucratic life create a space in which actions can be carried out without constant reflection, yet they also provide opportunities for initiative, for the refinement and expansion of tasks. Within this space, individuals can move between compliance and agency, participating in systems that both constrain and enable their actions. The persistence of such structures raises questions about how language and organization shape the possibilities of action. When processes are defined in ways that separate means from ends, when tasks are framed without reference to their consequences, the conditions are created for a form of engagement that is both active and detached. The banal does not eliminate responsibility; it redistributes it, embedding it within a network of roles and functions that make direct accountability difficult to establish.

To listen to the screams, as Lozowick urges, is to reintroduce what these systems exclude. It is to reconnect action with consequence, to restore the link between procedure and suffering that bureaucratic language obscures. This act of listening is not merely an ethical gesture but a methodological one, challenging the forms of analysis that rely on abstraction at the expense of experience. It demands a reconsideration of how history is written and how responsibility is understood. In this light, the critique of the banality of evil becomes not a rejection but a refinement. It calls for a distinction between the banality of appearance and the depth of engagement that may lie beneath it. The ordinary surface does not necessarily indicate an absence of intention; it may conceal a complex interplay of belief, ambition, and adaptation. Recognizing this interplay is essential for understanding how systems of violence are constructed and maintained. Thus, the figure of the bureaucrat must be rethought, not as a passive instrument but as a participant whose actions are shaped by both structure and choice. The challenge is to account for the ways in which these elements interact, producing outcomes that cannot be reduced to either alone. In confronting this challenge, one is forced to move beyond simplified categories and to engage with the full complexity of human behavior within systems of power.

The screams that echo through these accounts resist incorporation into neat explanations. They insist on the reality of suffering that underlies every abstraction, reminding us that behind every procedure lies a consequence that cannot be fully contained by language. To attend to them is to resist the closure that banality imposes, to keep open the space in which judgment and responsibility can be exercised.

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When Thinking Stops: The Ordinary Conditions of Catastrophe

In Elizabeth K. Minnich's The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking, the question of what people were thinking at the moment of committing or resisting atrocity is transformed into a more unsettling inquiry: what happens when thinking itself recedes, when action continues but reflection disappears. The disturbing testimony of a participant in the Rwandan genocide, who recounts killing a familiar man and then returning home to sleep without disturbance, does not reveal monstrous hatred but something far more difficult to confront—a life in which violence has been integrated into routine, where the extraordinary is absorbed into the ordinary without friction. The act does not interrupt the day; it completes it.

This normalization of harm reframes the problem of evil. It is no longer sufficient to ask why individuals commit atrocities in terms of ideology or passion alone. Instead, the focus shifts to the conditions under which such acts become thinkable, and more precisely, under which they cease to require thought altogether. The absence of reflection does not produce chaos but a peculiar form of order, where actions are guided by roles, expectations, and routines that demand execution rather than judgment. In such a condition, the moral dimension of action is not denied but rendered irrelevant, displaced by the requirements of function. Minnich's central insight lies in the recognition that systemic harm depends not on exceptional individuals but on ordinary participation. The same capacities that sustain everyday life—discipline, cooperation, ambition—can be mobilized in the service of destructive systems. The distinction between good and evil does not map neatly onto different kinds of people; it runs through the same structures of behavior. This recognition destabilizes the comforting belief that atrocity requires abnormality. Instead, it suggests that the potential for harm is embedded in the very qualities that enable social organization. Equally significant is the inversion of this claim: that acts of resistance and goodness do not require extraordinary virtue. Just as harm can be enacted through ordinary compliance, so too can it be resisted through ordinary attentiveness. The difference lies not in capacity but in orientation, in whether individuals engage in the reflective activity that allows them to question the frameworks within which they operate. Thinking, in this sense, is not an abstract intellectual exercise but a practical interruption, a moment in which the automatic flow of action is suspended and subjected to scrutiny.

The examples drawn from different historical contexts reinforce the universality of this dynamic. From the bureaucratic efficiency of Eichmann to the calculated brutality of apartheid operatives, from the manipulation of followers by figures like Charles Manson to the everyday functioning of genocidal systems, the pattern remains consistent. Violence is not always driven by intense emotion or ideological fervor; it often proceeds through habits, conventions, and unexamined assumptions. The language of work, duty, and success provides a framework within which harmful actions can be interpreted as necessary or even admirable. Language plays a crucial role in this process, not only by obscuring the reality of actions but by shaping the way they are understood. Euphemisms, clichés, and standardized expressions create a distance between words and their referents, allowing individuals to engage in harmful practices without fully confronting their implications. When killing becomes a task, when oppression becomes policy, when suffering becomes a statistic, the capacity for moral judgment is diminished. The banal language that facilitates these transformations does not eliminate awareness but reorganizes it, directing attention away from consequences and toward procedures. The thinness of the line between good and evil, as highlighted by those who have confronted perpetrators as complex human beings, further complicates the picture. To recognize the humanity of those who commit atrocities is not to excuse

their actions but to acknowledge that the potential for such actions is not confined to a separate category of individuals. This recognition is unsettling precisely because it removes the distance that allows for easy condemnation. It forces a confrontation with the conditions that make such actions possible and the ways in which those conditions might persist in different forms.

At the core of Minnich's argument is the claim that thoughtlessness is not merely an intellectual deficiency but a moral and political danger. When individuals cease to think, they become susceptible to the structures that surround them, adopting the logic of those structures as their own. This susceptibility does not require coercion; it operates through alignment, through the gradual adaptation of perception and judgment to the norms of the environment. The more these norms are repeated and reinforced, the less they appear as norms at all, becoming instead the natural order of things. This condition resonates with a broader grammar of banality in which repetition replaces reflection and conformity replaces judgment. The everyday routines that structure life create a sense of continuity and stability, but they can also obscure the need for critical engagement. When actions are embedded within these routines, they acquire a legitimacy that does not depend on explicit justification. The question of whether something is right or wrong is replaced by the question of whether it is expected or required. To counter this tendency, Minnich emphasizes the importance of cultivating attentiveness. This is not a call for constant moral deliberation but for the preservation of the capacity to pause, to question, to resist the immediate pressures of conformity. Such attentiveness disrupts the smooth functioning of systems that rely on unthinking participation, introducing friction where there would otherwise be seamless execution. It restores the connection between action and judgment, making it possible to evaluate rather than simply perform.

The implications of this perspective extend beyond the specific contexts of historical atrocities. In any system where roles, procedures, and expectations dominate, the risk of thoughtlessness persists. The challenge is not only to identify instances of harm but to understand the conditions that enable them, to recognize how ordinary practices can be mobilized in extraordinary ways. This understanding requires a shift in focus from outcomes to processes, from visible acts to the invisible structures that support them. In this light, the evil of banality is not a paradox but a condition in which the ordinary becomes the medium of harm. It reveals how the absence of thought can transform routine into mechanism, how the repetition of accepted forms can sustain systems of injustice, and how the capacity for both harm and good remains embedded in the same human faculties. The task, then, is not to eliminate banality but to interrupt it, to reintroduce thought into the spaces where it has receded, and to recognize that the difference between compliance and resistance may depend on something as fragile and as essential as the willingness to think.

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The Mask of Mediocrity: When Banality Becomes Strategy

In Matthew Sharpe's 2023 reconsideration of Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, the familiar image of Adolf Eichmann as an unthinking bureaucrat is unsettled by the emergence of new archival evidence, revealing not the absence of ideology but its

concealment beneath a carefully performed ordinariness. What appears, at first glance, as a correction of Arendt's thesis unfolds instead as a deepening of the problem she identified: the possibility that evil does not merely coincide with banality but actively deploys it as a shield. The question is no longer whether evil can be banal, but whether banality itself can be weaponized as a form of deception.

Arendt's original observation was grounded in the courtroom spectacle, where Eichmann presented himself as a man of limited imagination, bound by duty and incapable of independent judgment. His speech was marked by clichés, his reasoning by formula, his demeanor by an unsettling normality. From this, Arendt derived her provocative claim that the machinery of genocide could be operated by individuals who lacked both depth and hatred, whose primary failing was an inability to think. Yet the later discovery of the Sassen transcripts and Eichmann's own writings complicates this portrait. Here, removed from the constraints of legal defense, he appears not as passive but as committed, not as indifferent but as proud, expressing allegiance to the ideological foundations of the regime he served. This contrast does not simply refute the earlier interpretation; it reveals a doubling. Eichmann is both the banal bureaucrat and the ideological agent, but crucially, these are not separate identities. The banality observed by Arendt may itself have been an act, a calculated performance designed to obscure the depth of conviction that animated his actions. In this sense, banality ceases to be merely descriptive and becomes strategic. It functions as a surface behind which intention can hide, a neutral façade that disarms judgment by appearing devoid of content.

The implications of this shift are significant. If banality can be performed, then the absence of visible conviction cannot be taken as evidence of its absence in fact. The ordinary demeanor, the reliance on administrative language, the posture of obedience—all these can serve to deflect attention from the underlying structures of belief that guide action. Evil, in this configuration, does not require transparency; it thrives on opacity, on the gap between appearance and intention. The more convincingly it adopts the language of normality, the more difficult it becomes to confront. Sharpe's analysis highlights how Eichmann's postwar statements reveal a consistent pattern of rationalization and dehumanization. His references to victims as less than human, his invocation of conspiratorial narratives, and his expressions of pride in the scale of destruction all point to a sustained ideological commitment. These elements challenge the notion that his actions were merely the result of thoughtlessness. Instead, they suggest a complex interplay between belief and execution, where ideology provides the framework and banality provides the method of concealment.

This interplay extends to the mechanisms of deception that structured both the execution of the Holocaust and its subsequent narration. The use of euphemistic language, the systematic destruction of evidence, and the careful management of public perception all indicate a high degree of awareness among perpetrators. Deception operates on multiple levels: toward victims, who are misled about their fate; toward the perpetrators themselves, who reinterpret their actions as necessary or justified; and toward external observers, who are presented with a sanitized version of events. Banality, in this context, is not the absence of meaning but its manipulation, the reduction of extreme acts to administratively manageable terms. The figure of Eichmann thus becomes emblematic of a broader transformation in the understanding of evil. It is no longer sufficient to locate it in either ideological fervor or mechanical obedience alone. Rather, it emerges at the intersection of the two, where conviction is translated into routine, and where routine obscures conviction. The danger lies precisely in this translation, in the ability of systems to convert radical intentions into ordinary procedures, rendering them both efficient and difficult to

recognize. Reconsidering the banality of evil therefore requires a shift in emphasis. Arendt's focus on thoughtlessness remains crucial, but it must be complemented by an awareness of how thought can be concealed rather than absent. The inability to think is one pathway to evil, but so too is the capacity to think strategically in ways that evade accountability. The banal appearance does not necessarily indicate a lack of reflection; it may indicate a form of reflection oriented toward concealment.

This insight resonates with the broader dynamics of contemporary systems of communication and power. When language becomes saturated with standardized expressions, when actions are framed through neutral terminology, when processes are organized into routines that require no justification, the conditions are created for a similar form of invisibility. The more an action conforms to established patterns, the less it appears as a choice, and the more it is perceived as necessity. In such an environment, the distinction between genuine banality and performed banality becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The persistence of this ambiguity suggests that banality should not be understood as a fixed property but as a function within systems of meaning. It can arise from the absence of thought, as Arendt argued, but it can also be produced deliberately, as a means of evading scrutiny. In both cases, the effect is similar: the masking of responsibility, the diffusion of agency, and the normalization of actions that would otherwise be recognized as intolerable. To engage with this revised understanding is to confront the limitations of relying on appearances as indicators of moral reality. The ordinary face, the bureaucratic tone, the procedural context—none of these guarantee the absence of deeper motivations. On the contrary, they may serve to protect those motivations from exposure. The task, then, is not only to identify instances of banality but to interrogate their function, to ask what they conceal and how they operate within larger structures.

Extending this perspective further, one can see how the grammar of banality, as it manifests in language and communication, provides the conditions under which such concealment becomes possible. Repetition, normalization, and the circulation of standardized forms create an environment in which deviation is minimized and questioning is discouraged. Within this environment, actions can be carried out with minimal resistance, as they align with the expectations embedded in the system. The banal becomes the medium through which both thoughtlessness and calculated intention can be enacted without interruption.

Thus, the reconsideration of the banality of evil does not lead to its abandonment but to its transformation. It reveals that banality is not only a condition of absence but also a technique of presence, a way of being in the world that obscures as much as it reveals. Evil, in this light, is not simply banal; it is capable of adopting banality as its most effective form, blending into the ordinary until it becomes indistinguishable from it.

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The Clerk of Nothingness: Language, Obedience, and the Mechanism of Evil

In Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, the figure of Adolf Eichmann emerges not as an embodiment of monstrous hatred but as a disturbing demonstration

of how evil can be executed through the most ordinary structures of language, obedience, and institutional belonging. The shock of Arendt's analysis lies not in the scale of the crimes—already historically unparalleled—but in the unsettling simplicity of the agent who carried them out, a man whose defining characteristic was not ideological fanaticism but an almost complete absence of reflective thought.

The phrase banality of evil, which provoked such intense controversy, does not diminish the magnitude of the Holocaust but redefines its mechanism. Evil here is not rooted in depth, passion, or radical conviction, but in a kind of surface existence, where actions are carried out without internal engagement. Eichmann's insistence that he was merely following orders is not presented as a legal defense but as an existential condition. He did not perceive himself as acting; he perceived himself as executing functions. The distinction between decision and implementation collapses, and with it, the space for moral judgment disappears. Central to this condition is the role of language. Eichmann's speech is saturated with clichés, bureaucratic formulations, and ready-made expressions that replace thought with repetition. Terms such as resettlement operate not merely as euphemisms but as instruments of transformation, converting acts of extermination into administratively manageable procedures. Language ceases to describe reality and instead reorganizes it, creating a semantic environment in which the unthinkable becomes routine. The more these terms are repeated, the less they appear as distortions, until they become the only available framework for understanding action.

This reliance on formulaic language is not incidental but structural. It reflects a deeper incapacity to engage in the kind of inner dialogue that Arendt identifies as thinking. Thinking, in her sense, is not the application of rules but the ability to step back from one's own actions, to examine them from the perspective of others, to interrupt the flow of obedience with a moment of reflection. Eichmann's failure lies precisely in this absence. He does not question the commands he receives because he lacks the capacity to generate the distance necessary for questioning. His identity is entirely subsumed by his role, leaving no remainder from which resistance might emerge. The misappropriation of Kant's categorical imperative illustrates this substitution of judgment with obedience. Eichmann invokes Kant not to justify moral autonomy but to legitimize submission to authority, transforming a philosophy of universal law into a doctrine of unconditional compliance. The law, instead of being something one gives to oneself through reason, becomes something imposed from above, to be followed without hesitation. In this inversion, morality is emptied of its critical dimension and reduced to a system of directives that require no interpretation.

Equally revealing is Eichmann's relationship to belonging. His persistent attachment to organizations, from early associations to his role within the SS, indicates a dependence on external structures for the formation of identity. He does not define himself through reflection but through affiliation, seeking recognition within systems that provide ready-made purposes. This need for belonging eliminates the necessity of self-definition, replacing it with conformity. The individual becomes a function of the institution, and the question of responsibility is displaced onto the structure itself. The courtroom observations further intensify this image of ordinariness. Psychological evaluations reveal no signs of abnormality, no pathological traits that might distinguish Eichmann from others. His normality is precisely what renders his actions so unsettling. It suggests that the capacity for such deeds does not require exceptional conditions but can arise within the most conventional frameworks of behavior. The extraordinary is carried out through the ordinary, and the boundary between them becomes unstable.

Arendt's reflections on the Wannsee Conference crystallize this dynamic. Faced with the unanimous agreement of officials who embodied the authority of the state, Eichmann experiences

not moral conflict but relief. The presence of respectable figures endorsing the Final Solution confirms the legitimacy of the process, dissolving any residual doubt. Responsibility is redistributed across the system, and the individual's role becomes one of participation rather than decision. The analogy to Pontius Pilate captures this moment of abdication, where judgment is surrendered in favor of procedural compliance. The legal and political dimensions of the trial introduce another layer of complexity. Questions of jurisdiction, the retrospective nature of the crimes, and the performative aspects of the proceedings all point to the difficulty of addressing actions that exceed existing frameworks of law. The trial itself becomes a site where meaning is constructed and contested, where the narrative of the Holocaust is shaped not only by evidence but by the need to render it intelligible. Yet within this process, there is a risk of shifting focus away from the specific mechanisms that enabled Eichmann's actions, replacing them with broader symbolic representations.

The controversy surrounding Arendt's discussion of Jewish councils further illustrates the tension between explanation and accusation. By examining the role of these institutions, she does not seek to assign blame but to expose the complexity of situations in which individuals are forced to act within constrained and coercive systems. The violent reaction to this analysis reflects a broader discomfort with acknowledging how structures of power can implicate those who are themselves victims. It reveals the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between agency and compulsion in extreme conditions. What persists beyond these debates is the enduring force of Arendt's central insight: that the greatest danger lies not in the presence of radical evil as an exceptional phenomenon, but in its integration into the ordinary operations of life. When systems provide the language, the justification, and the structure for action, the need for individual judgment diminishes. The repetition of established forms replaces the effort of thinking, and the individual becomes a site where processes are executed rather than initiated.

This condition extends beyond the specific historical context in which it was observed. Whenever language becomes saturated with clichés, whenever actions are guided by predefined scripts, whenever belonging replaces reflection, the potential for a similar mechanism emerges. The banal is not the trivial but the normalized, the point at which repetition renders action unquestionable. In such a state, communication itself risks becoming a medium of transmission rather than creation, circulating forms that require no engagement. To confront this condition requires more than moral condemnation. It demands a reactivation of thinking as an active process, a refusal to accept the given meanings that structure perception and action. Thinking interrupts the flow of banality, introducing hesitation where there would otherwise be continuity. It reopens the space in which responsibility can be assumed, restoring the distinction between acting and merely following.

Thus, the banality of evil reveals a profound vulnerability in the structures of modern life. It shows how systems designed to organize and facilitate action can, under certain conditions, eliminate the very capacities that make ethical judgment possible. The lesson is not that evil is ordinary, but that the ordinary can become the vehicle for evil when thought is absent. In recognizing this, one begins to see that the struggle against such conditions is not only political or institutional, but fundamentally linguistic and cognitive, a matter of preserving the fragile capacity to think within a world that constantly encourages its suspension.

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Thoughtlessness as Method: The Ordinary Machinery of Evil

In Bernard J. Bergen's reading of Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, the scandal provoked by the conjunction of banality and evil reveals less about the historical event itself than about the limits of our interpretive frameworks when confronted with a form of wrongdoing that refuses both demonization and simplification. The controversy that followed the publication of Arendt's work was not merely a disagreement over facts or judgments, but a deeper conflict over how evil should be understood, narrated, and contained within moral language. What was at stake was not only the memory of the Holocaust but the very possibility of thinking about it without resorting to categories that either elevate it into incomprehensible monstrosity or reduce it to familiar patterns.

The initial reactions to Arendt's thesis split along a predictable axis. On one side stood those who interpreted the banality of evil as a warning about the potential universality of wrongdoing, suggesting that under certain conditions any individual could become complicit in atrocity. This reading transformed Eichmann into a mirror, reflecting a latent capacity within ordinary human beings. On the other side were those who saw in Arendt's formulation a dangerous abstraction, one that risked diluting the specificity of the Holocaust by subsuming it under general laws of behavior. For these critics, the use of the term banal appeared to trivialize what demanded absolute singularity, opening the door to interpretations that might inadvertently mitigate responsibility. Yet both positions, as Bergen emphasizes, fail to grasp the precise nature of Arendt's intervention. The focus on whether evil is universal or unique misses the more unsettling claim that Arendt advances: that the problem lies not in the magnitude of the crime but in the structure of the agent who commits it. Eichmann does not appear as a figure of exceptional hatred or ideological fanaticism, but as someone whose defining characteristic is an inability to think. This inability is not a lack of intelligence or knowledge, but a failure of reflective judgment, a refusal or incapacity to examine one's own actions in relation to others. It is this absence of inner dialogue that constitutes the core of what Arendt calls banality.

In this sense, banality does not refer to the triviality of the act but to the ordinariness of the mechanism through which it is carried out. Evil becomes banal when it is executed without depth, without deliberation, without the internal resistance that thinking might provide. Eichmann's self-presentation in the courtroom, unchanged from his earlier role, exemplifies this condition. His identity is entirely absorbed into the functions he performs, leaving no space for critical distance. He does not question the system; he inhabits it completely, allowing its logic to replace his own capacity for judgment. This absorption into role and system marks a broader transformation in the nature of individuality under totalitarian conditions. The individual is no longer a source of action but a point of transmission, a conduit through which commands pass without alteration. Authority does not need to impose itself violently when it can operate through such internalization. The subject becomes indistinguishable from the structure it serves, and responsibility is dispersed into the system, making it difficult to locate or confront. In this configuration, evil does not erupt as a deviation from the norm but unfolds as the norm itself, carried out through procedures that appear routine and justified.

Arendt's insistence on thinking as the central counterforce to this condition redefines the ethical landscape. Thinking, in her account, is not the accumulation of knowledge or the application of rules, but an ongoing activity of questioning, a dialogue with oneself that interrupts the automatic execution of commands. It is precisely this interruption that is absent in Eichmann's case. His actions are not the result of a calculated decision to do evil but of an unexamined adherence to a system that provides ready-made meanings and justifications. The banality of evil thus lies in the

substitution of thinking with compliance, of judgment with repetition. The failure to recognize this dimension in the debates surrounding Arendt's work reflects a broader difficulty in confronting forms of power that operate through normalization rather than coercion. When evil is understood only in terms of intention or ideology, it becomes possible to isolate it in specific individuals or groups. Arendt's analysis disrupts this comfort by showing how systems can produce conditions in which wrongdoing is enacted without the need for explicit malice. The danger lies not only in the presence of destructive ideologies but in the absence of critical reflection that would resist their implementation.

This insight extends beyond the historical context of the Holocaust into a more general condition in which meaning is increasingly externalized. When frameworks of interpretation are provided in advance, when language and categories dictate how reality is perceived, the space for individual judgment narrows. The subject becomes reliant on pre-existing structures to make sense of the world, reducing the need for independent thought. In such a situation, action follows from available scripts rather than from deliberate consideration, and the possibility of questioning these scripts diminishes. The connection between this condition and the broader dynamics of banality becomes evident when one considers how repetition functions within systems of meaning. Just as linguistic clichés circulate without reflection, so too do actions that conform to established patterns. The more a behavior is repeated and normalized, the less it appears as a choice, and the more it becomes an automatic response. Banality, in this sense, is not the absence of significance but the result of excessive familiarity, where the extraordinary is rendered ordinary through constant repetition.

In this light, the banality of evil can be understood as a specific manifestation of a wider process in which the structures that organize thought and action become invisible. The system does not need to justify itself when its operations are taken for granted. Individuals participate in its functioning without perceiving themselves as agents, and the distinction between acting and following dissolves. The erosion of this distinction is what makes the condition so dangerous, as it undermines the very basis of moral responsibility. Arendt's later reflections on thinking deepen this analysis by linking the capacity for judgment to the maintenance of individuality. To think is to maintain a distance from oneself, to refuse complete identification with any given role or system. This distance allows for the possibility of refusal, of saying no to commands that violate ethical principles. Without it, the individual becomes fully integrated into the system, and action proceeds without interruption. The banality of evil thus points to the fragility of this distance, to the ease with which it can be eroded under conditions that discourage reflection. To engage with Arendt's work is therefore to confront not only a historical event but a persistent vulnerability in human existence. The conditions that made the Final Solution possible are not confined to a specific time or place; they reveal a structural potential that can emerge wherever thinking is replaced by unexamined conformity. The challenge is not only to remember but to remain vigilant, to cultivate the capacity for reflection that resists the pull of ready-made meanings.

In extending these insights, one can see how the mechanisms identified by Arendt resonate with broader transformations in communication and social organization. When systems provide predefined pathways for action and interpretation, the role of the individual shifts from creator to executor. The repetition of established forms replaces the generation of new ones, and the space for critical engagement narrows. The banal becomes the dominant mode, not because it lacks importance, but because it structures the conditions under which importance can be recognized. Thus, the banality of evil is not a paradox to be resolved but a condition to be understood. It reveals how the most extreme forms of wrongdoing can emerge from the most ordinary processes, how the absence of thought can have consequences that exceed any intentional design. In this

recognition lies both the danger and the possibility: the danger of a world in which systems operate without interruption, and the possibility of interrupting them through the simple yet demanding act of thinking.

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Polite Distance: The Managed Ordinary of Neoliberal Conviviality

In Emily Johansen's The Banal Conviviality of Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism, the banal emerges as a carefully regulated social atmosphere in which difference is not erased but domesticated, rendered harmless through repetition, politeness, and routine interaction. The metropolitan encounter with the other—once imagined as a transformative moment of cultural exchange—becomes instead a predictable gesture, a ritual of acknowledgment that leaves underlying structures intact. What appears as openness is revealed as management, a system in which diversity circulates as a value while inequality remains unaddressed.

The everyday interactions depicted in Maggie Gee's My Cleaner and Tessa Hadley's The London Train do not dramatize conflict; they neutralize it. Cultural difference is encountered, registered, and then absorbed into the flow of ordinary life without producing rupture. This absorption is central to the logic of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, where the presence of diversity serves as evidence of progress while simultaneously masking the conditions that structure it. The banal is not the absence of engagement but its containment, ensuring that encounters remain within the bounds of comfort and functionality. This containment is closely tied to the transformation of subjectivity under neoliberalism. The individual is positioned as the primary site of meaning and development, and encounters with difference are framed as opportunities for personal growth rather than collective transformation. The narrative of self-actualization replaces that of social change, redirecting attention from structural conditions to individual experience. In this context, the other becomes a resource, a means through which the self can expand its horizons without altering the frameworks that define those horizons. The adaptation of the bildungsroman to this context reveals the limits of this model. Traditionally concerned with the reconciliation of the individual with society, the form now reflects a society that no longer offers such reconciliation. The characters who move through these narratives do not arrive at integration; they remain suspended within a system that privileges autonomy while undermining solidarity. Their encounters with difference do not lead to transformation but to repetition, reinforcing the patterns that define their lives. The banal thus becomes a narrative outcome, marking the failure of development within a system that promises it.

The texture of everyday life in these novels is marked by a peculiar intimacy without connection. Bodies share space, voices intersect, routines overlap, yet the distance between individuals persists. This condition, described as indifferent intimacy, reflects a form of coexistence that is neither hostile nor engaged. It is sustained by a tacit agreement to avoid depth, to maintain a surface of harmony that prevents conflict but also precludes meaningful relation. The banal operates here as a buffer, smoothing interactions while preserving separation. Moments of irritation or discomfort reveal the fragility of this arrangement. The reaction to unfamiliar food, the impatience with distant voices mediated through technology, the subtle assertion of hierarchy—these are not anomalies but symptoms of a system that tolerates difference only within certain limits. When those limits are exceeded, the underlying structures become visible, exposing the persistence of

inequality beneath the surface of conviviality. The banal, in these moments, fractures, revealing the tensions it ordinarily conceals. The spatial dynamics of village and city further illuminate this condition. The village, associated with forms of collective life that have been eroded, stands as a memory of a different social organization, one in which relationships were structured by proximity and shared experience. The city, by contrast, embodies the dispersal and abstraction of neoliberal modernity, where connections are mediated by markets and institutions. The movement between these spaces reflects not a simple transition but a reconfiguration of social relations, in which the promise of mobility is accompanied by a loss of cohesion.

This reconfiguration is inseparable from broader economic transformations. The decline of industrial structures and the rise of flexible labor reshape the conditions under which individuals live and interact. The banal becomes a reflection of these changes, as the routines of everyday life adapt to new forms of work and uncertainty. The repetition of commuter journeys, the fragmentation of time, the constant negotiation of identity within shifting contexts—all these elements contribute to a sense of continuity that masks instability. Within this framework, the notion of conviviality takes on an ambivalent character. It suggests warmth, openness, and shared experience, yet in its banal form, it functions as a technique of governance. By promoting a surface of harmony, it reduces the likelihood of conflict while leaving underlying inequalities untouched. The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism is thus both an achievement and a limitation, enabling coexistence while constraining the possibility of deeper engagement. The persistence of this condition raises questions about the relationship between representation and critique. By focusing on the ordinary, these narratives do not simply depict the world as it is; they reveal the mechanisms that sustain it. The repetition of banal interactions becomes a form of exposure, showing how systems of power operate through everyday practices. The absence of dramatic transformation is itself significant, indicating the difficulty of effecting change within a framework that absorbs and neutralizes difference.

Extending this analysis, one can see how the grammar of banality operates across different domains of contemporary life. The normalization of diversity without transformation, the emphasis on individual experience over collective structures, the management of difference through routine interaction—these are not confined to the literary domain but characterize broader social processes. The banal becomes a mode of organization, shaping how individuals relate to one another and to the systems that govern them. Thus, the banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism reveals a paradox at the heart of contemporary modernity. The more difference is acknowledged, the more it is contained; the more interaction occurs, the less it transforms. The ordinary becomes the site where this paradox is lived, where the promise of openness coexists with the persistence of inequality. By attending to this condition, these narratives challenge the assumptions that underlie contemporary discourses of diversity, showing how the banal can both sustain and obscure the structures of power that define the modern world.

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Before Banality: Total Control and the Passion of Belief

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the problem of evil is wrested away from the comfortable domain of banality and returned to a more unsettling terrain, where conviction, desire, and belief operate with full intensity rather than absence. The

familiar thesis that evil emerges from thoughtlessness is here challenged by a historical counterpoint: regimes in which the demand is not for passive compliance but for active, demonstrable faith. The spectacle of the Inquisition reveals a form of power that does not tolerate indifference; it requires interiority itself to be aligned with authority.

The Inquisition, as reconstructed in this account, appears not as a primitive precursor to modern systems but as an alternative articulation of the same fundamental drive: the desire for total control. Yet its methods expose something that modern bureaucratic systems often obscure. Where later regimes may accept outward conformity, the inquisitorial apparatus penetrates further, seeking evidence of belief, sincerity, and inner transformation. The subject is not merely required to obey but to become, to internalize the structure of power until no distinction remains between external command and internal conviction. This obliteration of the boundary between public and private marks a decisive departure from the logic of banality. The banal presupposes a gap—a space in which individuals act without reflection, where language replaces thought and routine substitutes for judgment. In the inquisitorial model, this gap is precisely what must be eliminated. Thought itself becomes an object of surveillance, belief a matter of proof. The subject is compelled not to drift into complicity but to actively demonstrate allegiance, to perform conviction as a continuous act. Such a system reconfigures the nature of evil. It is no longer the byproduct of administrative inertia or linguistic emptiness but the result of an intensified relation between individual and ideology. The perpetrators within this framework are not faceless functionaries but participants in a shared horizon of meaning, one that legitimizes and even sanctifies their actions. The term holocaust, in its earlier usage as a sacred offering, reveals the disturbing fusion of violence and devotion, where destruction is not concealed but celebrated within a symbolic order.

The comparison with modern totalitarian regimes complicates rather than resolves this picture. The mechanisms of control—interrogation, confession, surveillance—recur across historical contexts, suggesting a continuity that transcends technological difference. What changes is not the aim but the medium. Where the Inquisition relies on ritual and doctrine, modern regimes deploy media, bureaucracy, and scientific discourse. Yet the underlying imperative remains: the alignment of the individual with a totalizing system that tolerates no deviation. This continuity challenges the assumption that totalitarianism is a uniquely modern phenomenon. Instead, it appears as a recurring possibility within different historical configurations, emerging wherever the conditions of legitimacy are unstable and the need for cohesion becomes urgent. The newly formed state, lacking the sedimented authority of long-standing institutions, turns to totalizing strategies to secure its existence. Ideology becomes a tool not only of governance but of ontological stabilization, defining who belongs and who must be excluded. Within this framework, the critique of the banality of evil acquires a new urgency. If evil can be enacted through conviction as well as through thoughtlessness, then the focus on banality alone risks obscuring the active dimensions of participation. The figure of the perpetrator must be reconsidered, not as an empty vessel of command but as an agent whose actions are shaped by belief, ambition, and identification with power. The distinction between passive compliance and active engagement collapses, revealing a spectrum of involvement that cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model.

The comparative method employed in this analysis further underscores the variability of these dynamics. The divergence between Spain and France, or between Germany and Sweden, suggests that totalitarian outcomes are not inevitable but contingent. Structures of statehood, historical continuity, and cultural cohesion influence the degree to which totalizing strategies are adopted. Stability reduces the need for ideological intensification, while crisis amplifies it. The banal routines of everyday governance give way, in such moments, to the extraordinary demands of total

control. Yet even within these extraordinary conditions, the logic of banality is not entirely absent. It reappears in the normalization of practices that, in another context, would be unthinkable. The repetition of rituals, the routinization of interrogation, the bureaucratization of belief—these processes transform acts of violence into elements of an ordinary world. The non-banal origin of such systems does not prevent their eventual banalization, as the extraordinary becomes habitual and the extreme becomes everyday. This tension between conviction and normalization reveals a deeper structure underlying the phenomenon of evil. It is not located exclusively in either thoughtlessness or belief but in the capacity of systems to integrate both. The passionate commitment of the few and the routine compliance of the many form a continuum, sustaining the apparatus of control across different levels of intensity. The grammar of banality thus intersects with the rhetoric of conviction, producing a hybrid form in which ideology is both fervently embraced and mechanically reproduced.

Extending this insight, one can see how the problem of totalitarianism cannot be confined to a single historical moment or explanatory framework. It is a potential embedded within the structures of power, emerging whenever the conditions allow for the fusion of authority and meaning. The demand for total control—whether over actions, language, or thought—redefines the relationship between individual and system, transforming subjects into bearers of an imposed reality. In this sense, the non-banality of evil does not negate the banal; it precedes and enables it. The intensity of belief establishes the conditions under which repetition can occur, while repetition ensures the persistence of the system beyond the initial moment of conviction. The lesson that emerges is not that evil is either banal or non-banal, but that it traverses both domains, shifting between them as it consolidates its hold. To understand this movement is to confront the full complexity of the structures that shape human action, where thought, belief, and routine converge in ways that resist simple categorization.

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Totality Without Modernity: The Architecture of Absolute Control

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the concept of totalitarianism is liberated from the narrow confines of modernity and redefined as a structural ambition rather than a historical accident. Against definitions that bind totalitarianism to industrial society, mass parties, and technological apparatuses, this perspective isolates its core: the drive toward total control over thought, belief, and social existence. What appears modern in its instruments reveals itself as perennial in its logic.

The insistence on modernity as a defining condition has obscured the analytical horizon. If totalitarianism is defined through features exclusive to industrial societies, then the possibility of its existence outside that framework is foreclosed in advance. Such a definition does not explain history; it restricts it. By contrast, when one distinguishes between essence and instrument, a different picture emerges. The mass party, so central to twentieth-century regimes, is revealed as a contingent mechanism rather than an essential characteristic. Its function is to organize allegiance, but allegiance itself precedes and exceeds any particular institutional form. The example of the Spanish Inquisition disrupts the modernist narrative with particular force. Here, without parties, without industrial media, without bureaucratic mass organization in the modern sense, one encounters a system that achieves a more penetrating form of control. The demand is

not that a fraction of the population participates in ideological enforcement, but that the entirety of society is implicated in it. The reach of power extends beyond behavior into belief, beyond compliance into conviction. In this sense, the absence of modern instruments does not weaken the system; it intensifies its immediacy. What defines totalitarianism, then, is not the presence of specific structures but the orientation of power toward totality. This orientation manifests most clearly in the construction of a totalizing ideology. Such an ideology does not merely justify authority; it absorbs reality into itself, presenting its vision as the only possible truth. The multiplicity of perspectives is reduced to a singular narrative, within which dissent appears not as disagreement but as deviation from reality itself. Truth is no longer contested; it is monopolized.

This monopolization transforms the conditions of thought. When ideology becomes the horizon of meaning, alternative interpretations are not simply suppressed—they become unthinkable. The individual is not only constrained in action but in imagination. The space in which critical reflection might occur is colonized, leaving no external point from which the system can be evaluated. Totalitarianism thus operates not only through coercion but through epistemological closure, redefining what can be known and how it can be known. The structures that enforce this closure vary across contexts, yet their function remains consistent. Whether through a political party, a religious institution, or a security apparatus, these organizations act as conduits through which ideology is translated into practice. They are not merely instruments of repression; they are mechanisms of integration, binding individuals into the system through participation. The distinction between ruler and subject becomes blurred, as enforcement is distributed across the social body. The role of belief within this framework is crucial. Totalitarian systems do not rely solely on fear; they require a form of faith. This faith may take secular or religious forms, but its function is the same: to align the individual with a higher purpose that transcends personal interest. In modern regimes, this purpose is articulated through political doctrines—race, class, nation—while in pre-modern contexts it is grounded in religious authority. The difference lies in content, not structure. Both forms demand adherence, not as a pragmatic necessity but as a moral imperative.

Fear, however, remains indispensable. It operates not only as a deterrent but as a structuring force, shaping the social environment in which individuals act. The pervasive presence of surveillance, punishment, and uncertainty produces a condition in which conformity appears as the only viable option. Yet fear alone cannot sustain totalitarianism; it must be complemented by belief, by the internalization of the system's logic. The combination of terror and conviction creates a stability that neither could achieve independently. The integration of religion into this analysis further complicates conventional accounts. Rather than viewing totalitarianism as a product of secularization, this perspective recognizes the capacity of religion itself to function as a totalizing ideology. The Spanish Inquisition demonstrates how religious doctrine can be mobilized to achieve comprehensive control, while contemporary examples reveal the persistence of this dynamic. The distinction between secular and religious systems becomes secondary to the question of how belief is organized and enforced. This broader definition enables a comparative approach that transcends historical boundaries. By identifying the essential components of totalitarianism—ideology, enforcement, belief, and fear—one can analyze diverse cases without reducing them to a single model. The contrast between Spain and France, or between Germany and Sweden, illustrates how these components interact with specific historical conditions. Totalitarianism emerges not as an inevitable outcome but as a contingent configuration, shaped by crises of legitimacy and the strategies adopted to resolve them.

Yet this expansion of the concept also reveals its unsettling proximity to ordinary forms of social organization. The elements that constitute totalitarianism—shared beliefs, institutional enforcement, collective identities—are not alien to everyday life. What distinguishes the totalitarian form is their intensification and integration into a closed system. The banal structures of social existence are reconfigured into instruments of total control, demonstrating how the extraordinary can emerge from the ordinary through a process of amplification. In this sense, the redefinition of totalitarianism also reframes the problem of banality. The focus shifts from the absence of thought to the conditions under which thought is structured. The banal is no longer merely the domain of routine and cliché; it becomes the medium through which totality is maintained. The repetition of ideological forms, the normalization of belief, the routinization of enforcement—all these processes contribute to the stabilization of the system. The extraordinary ambition of total control is realized through the ordinary mechanisms of everyday life. Thus, totalitarianism appears not as a historical anomaly but as a structural possibility, one that can manifest across different epochs and configurations. Its essence lies in the convergence of ideology, organization, belief, and fear into a unified system that seeks to encompass the entirety of human existence. By disentangling this essence from its modern manifestations, one gains a clearer understanding of its dynamics and, perhaps, a more acute awareness of its latent presence within the structures of the present.

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Forging Unity Through Exclusion: State-Building and the Genesis of Total Control

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the emergence of totalitarian regimes is relocated from the abstract domain of modern rationality to the concrete processes of state formation, where the struggle for legitimacy generates conditions under which total control becomes not an aberration but a strategy. The familiar narrative that attributes totalitarianism to bureaucratic modernity and its capacity to produce "desk murderers" dissolves under this lens, revealing instead a deeper structural logic: the need of fragile states to consolidate identity, authority, and cohesion through intensified ideological and institutional means.

The explanatory weakness of the banality-of-evil framework becomes evident when confronted with historical variation. If modern bureaucracy alone were sufficient to produce totalitarianism, then its presence should yield consistent outcomes across societies. Yet the divergence between Germany and Sweden, or between Spain and France, exposes the insufficiency of such reasoning. The problem is not the existence of administrative rationality but the conditions under which it is mobilized. Bureaucracy is not the origin of totalitarianism; it is one of its possible instruments. Cultural explanations fare no better. The attempt to root totalitarianism in national character—whether in Protestant discipline or authoritarian traditions—fails to account for counterexamples that undermine its claims. The Lutheran uniformity of Sweden did not culminate in totalitarian domination, just as Catholic France did not replicate the trajectory of Spain. Culture, while

significant, does not operate in isolation; it is mediated by institutional arrangements and historical contingencies that shape its political expression. The invocation of a special national path merely redescribes the phenomenon without explaining its emergence. Similarly, class-based analyses, though illuminating in certain respects, encounter limits when extended beyond specific cases. The notion that totalitarian regimes arise from the temporary equilibrium of competing classes captures aspects of political instability but does not fully explain the particular forms that such regimes take. The ideological specificity of Nazism, with its racial obsessions, or the religious intensity of the Spanish Inquisition, cannot be reduced to class dynamics alone. These systems mobilize deeper symbolic resources, transforming social conflict into existential struggle.

Actor-centered approaches, focusing on decisions, elections, and contingent events, provide insight into the mechanisms of power acquisition but lack the capacity to explain why certain paths are available in some contexts and not in others. The rise of a leader, the outcome of an election, or the miscalculation of elites becomes meaningful only within a broader structure that renders such outcomes possible. Without this structure, events appear as isolated accidents rather than as expressions of underlying conditions. It is within this analytical impasse that the framework of state-building acquires its explanatory force. The formation of a state is not merely an administrative process; it is an existential project, concerned with the creation of a collective identity capable of sustaining authority. When this identity is fragile or contested, the temptation to enforce unity through exclusion intensifies. Totalitarianism emerges, in this sense, as an extreme solution to a problem of cohesion: the need to define who belongs and who must be eliminated from the body politic. The case of Spain illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. The unification of disparate regions under a single crown created a political entity without a corresponding cultural unity. In the absence of a shared language or historical narrative, religion became the axis around which identity was constructed. The Inquisition functioned not only as an instrument of repression but as a mechanism of integration, enforcing a homogeneity that the state itself could not organically produce. The identification of Jews and Muslims as outgroups was not incidental; it was constitutive of the emerging national identity.

France, by contrast, did not require such measures to the same extent. Its longer history as a consolidated kingdom provided a reservoir of legitimacy that reduced the urgency of ideological homogenization. The Inquisition, while present, remained peripheral to the central project of statehood, lacking the integration necessary to transform it into a totalizing system. The difference lies not in the methods available but in the necessity perceived by those in power. Sweden offers a further variation, where the inclusion of peasants within political structures created a form of legitimacy that mitigated the appeal of authoritarian solutions. The integration of diverse social groups into the state apparatus fostered a sense of participation that reduced the need for coercive unity. Here, state-building proceeds through incorporation rather than exclusion, demonstrating that the same structural challenge can be addressed through different strategies. Germany, on the other hand, exemplifies the dangers inherent in rapid and incomplete state formation. The unification under Bismarck produced a state with strong administrative capacities but weak democratic foundations. The persistence of a conservative bureaucracy, combined with the delegitimization of the Weimar Republic, created a vacuum in which radical solutions could flourish. The identification of Jews as a unifying enemy provided a means to forge cohesion in a fragmented society, transforming social anxiety into ideological certainty.

Across these cases, a pattern emerges: totalitarianism is most likely to arise where the state lacks legitimacy and seeks to compensate through the construction of a totalizing identity. This identity is not merely asserted; it is enforced through institutions that penetrate social life, reshaping

behavior, belief, and perception. The banal routines of administration and daily existence become the carriers of this identity, embedding it within the fabric of everyday life. Yet the emphasis on structure does not eliminate the role of agency. Individuals operate within these frameworks, making choices that can either reinforce or resist the trajectory toward total control. The significance of state-building lies in its capacity to shape the range of possible actions, to create conditions under which certain decisions become more likely than others. It does not determine outcomes, but it structures the field within which outcomes are produced. This interplay between structure and agency reveals the complexity of totalitarian emergence. It is neither the inevitable result of modernity nor the product of singular decisions. It is a process, unfolding through the interaction of institutional development, ideological construction, and social dynamics. The banal and the extraordinary intersect within this process, as everyday practices are mobilized to sustain an overarching system of control.

Extending this insight, one can recognize that the problem of totalitarianism is inseparable from the broader question of how societies construct and maintain cohesion. The strategies employed—whether inclusive or exclusionary, pluralistic or totalizing—shape not only political outcomes but the very conditions of thought and interaction. The banal, in this context, is not trivial; it is the medium through which these strategies are realized, the space in which the abstract ambitions of power are translated into lived experience. Thus, state-building emerges as a critical lens through which to understand the genesis of totalitarian systems. It reveals how the pursuit of unity, when combined with instability and fear, can lead to the creation of regimes that seek to encompass the totality of human life. By situating totalitarianism within this broader process, one gains a more nuanced understanding of its origins and a clearer view of the conditions under which it might be resisted.

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Manufacturing the Enemy: Evil as a Strategy of Cohesion

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, evil is stripped of its metaphysical aura and repositioned within the concrete mechanics of power, where it appears not as an aberration but as a deliberate instrument in the fragile process of state formation. The question is no longer why individuals commit atrocities in isolation, but why entire populations are mobilized to participate in them, and under what conditions such mobilization becomes both possible and necessary. The answer proposed is disquietingly structural: evil is not merely tolerated by totalitarian regimes—it is produced, organized, and deployed as a means of political consolidation.

The critique of modernist explanations is central to this repositioning. The association of evil with industrial efficiency, epitomized by the image of mechanized extermination, obscures the broader spectrum of violence that characterizes both modern and pre-modern regimes. The factory of death is only one manifestation, not the essence. When one considers the shootings, the starvation, the slow attrition of bodies through neglect and deprivation, the illusion of a purely technological evil dissolves. What remains is a more enduring pattern: the systematic infliction of harm upon those

rendered defenseless, regardless of the tools employed. This continuity extends across historical epochs. The brutality of ancient warfare, where annihilation of entire populations was not only accepted but valorized, reveals that the capacity for organized destruction precedes modernity. The Inquisition, though less spectacular in its methods, pursued a different form of eradication—one that targeted identity itself. Forced conversions, expulsions, and the suppression of cultural practices constituted a form of violence that did not always kill the body but sought to extinguish the conditions of existence for entire groups. Evil, in this sense, is not confined to physical extermination; it encompasses the deliberate dismantling of ways of life. The effort to define evil within this framework is therefore necessarily precise. It is not a vague moral category but an action: the intentional imposition of suffering upon those who cannot resist, carried out with awareness of its consequences. This definition shifts attention from abstract judgments to concrete practices, emphasizing the relational nature of harm. Evil is not simply what is done, but how and to whom it is done—against those rendered powerless by the very systems that target them.

Within the context of state-building, this definition acquires a strategic dimension. Newly formed states, lacking the legitimacy that accrues over time, confront an immediate problem: how to bind disparate populations into a coherent whole. The construction of an external or internal enemy provides a solution. By identifying a group as fundamentally alien and threatening, the state creates a focal point around which unity can be organized. The enemy is not discovered; it is produced through a process of labeling, dehumanization, and amplification of perceived threat. This process unfolds through a series of transformations. First, difference is marked and named, distinguishing the outgroup from the ingroup. Then, this difference is imbued with negative value, recoded as inferiority, danger, or corruption. Finally, the outgroup is positioned as an existential threat, whose presence endangers the survival of the collective. At this stage, violence becomes not only permissible but necessary, framed as an act of defense rather than aggression. The moral inversion is complete: harm inflicted upon the outgroup is reinterpreted as protection of the ingroup. The mobilization of the population within this framework is crucial. Evil is not enacted solely by elites; it requires participation, or at least acquiescence, from broader segments of society. This participation is facilitated by the alignment of ideology with everyday experience. The banal routines of life—language, social interaction, institutional practices—become carriers of the new order, embedding its logic within the ordinary. The extraordinary act of violence is thus prepared and sustained by the ordinary structures of existence.

Culture plays a significant but secondary role in this process. Pre-existing prejudices provide a reservoir of meanings that can be activated and intensified. They offer ready-made categories through which the outgroup can be defined and dehumanized. Yet these prejudices, in themselves, do not produce systematic violence. They require a political context in which they can be mobilized, a situation in which the state finds it advantageous to transform latent biases into active hostility. Culture, therefore, is not the cause but the material upon which political strategies operate. The contrast between unstable and stable states highlights this dynamic. In long-established societies, where legitimacy is less contested, the need to construct existential enemies is reduced. Prejudices may persist, but they do not necessarily translate into organized campaigns of violence. The structures of inclusion, however imperfect, provide alternative means of maintaining cohesion. In newly formed or crisis-ridden states, by contrast, the absence of such structures creates a vacuum that is often filled through exclusionary practices. The urgency of consolidation accelerates the transformation of difference into threat. This perspective reframes the relationship between evil and banality. The acts themselves may become routinized, integrated into the fabric of daily life, but their origin lies in a strategic decision to employ violence as a tool of unity. The banal does not generate evil; it normalizes it. The initial moment of mobilization, in

which the outgroup is defined and targeted, is not banal but deliberate, often accompanied by intense ideological and emotional investment. Only after this moment does the process settle into repetition, where participation becomes habitual and unquestioned.

Thus, evil emerges as both event and process: an initial act of definition and exclusion, followed by a sustained practice of normalization. The state, in its quest for legitimacy, orchestrates this transformation, converting insecurity into aggression and difference into danger. The population, in turn, becomes both the instrument and the audience of this process, enacting and witnessing the violence that binds it together. Extending this analysis, one can discern a broader implication for the understanding of political power. The capacity to define enemies, to assign value to difference, and to mobilize collective action around these definitions is not limited to overtly totalitarian regimes. It represents a latent potential within the very structure of the state, one that can be activated under specific conditions. The study of evil, therefore, is inseparable from the study of how societies construct belonging and exclusion, how they negotiate the boundaries of the collective. In this light, the phenomenon of evil appears less as a deviation from normality and more as an extreme articulation of its underlying logic. The processes that sustain everyday social order—classification, identification, differentiation—are intensified and redirected, producing outcomes that are both horrifying and, in a structural sense, comprehensible. To confront this reality is to recognize that the distance between the ordinary and the extreme is not as great as it might seem, and that the conditions under which it can be traversed are embedded within the very mechanisms of social and political life.

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The Absolute Idea: Totalizing Ideology and the Rituals of Obedience

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, totalizing ideology emerges not as a mere belief system but as a comprehensive architecture of reality, one that does not simply guide action but absorbs the very conditions under which action becomes thinkable. The distinction between pluralist and totalitarian orders is thus not merely institutional but epistemological. Sweden's democratic plurality, marked by competing ideologies and political contestation, reveals a space in which meaning remains open, where no single narrative claims exclusive authority. By contrast, the totalitarian system closes this space, replacing multiplicity with a singular horizon that admits no alternative.

The case of Nazi Germany exemplifies this closure with particular clarity. Its ideological foundation in racial struggle does not merely interpret history; it restructures it into a deterministic narrative in which all events are subordinated to the logic of biological conflict. The individual is no longer an autonomous agent but a function of this narrative, defined by racial identity and bound to its imperatives. Loyalty to the Führer becomes not a political choice but an existential necessity, an expression of alignment with the supposed laws of nature. Ideology here is not external to life; it is life's organizing principle. Yet it is in the comparison with pre-modern regimes that the

concept of totalizing ideology reveals its full scope. The French inquisition, while repressive, lacked the integrative force required to transform it into a totalitarian system. Its interventions were selective, its motivations often pragmatic, its reach limited by competing authorities and internal divisions. The monarchy's engagement with religious power did not extend to a comprehensive restructuring of everyday life. The ideological field remained fragmented, allowing for pockets of autonomy and deviation. Spain, by contrast, demonstrates how ideology can become the central axis of state-building. The unification of the kingdom required not only political consolidation but cultural and spiritual homogeneity. Catholicism, elevated to the status of an absolute truth, provided the framework through which this homogeneity could be enforced. The Inquisition did not merely punish heresy; it sought to eliminate the very possibility of difference, extending its scrutiny into the most intimate aspects of existence. Behavior, habit, and even memory became objects of suspicion, as the regime pursued a purity that could never be fully achieved.

This pursuit of purity reveals the radical nature of totalizing ideology. It does not accept the limits of enforcement; it continuously expands them, redefining the boundaries of what must be controlled. The retrospective punishment of past actions, the interpretation of trivial gestures as signs of hidden belief, the insistence on visible conformity in every domain—these practices illustrate an ideology that refuses to stabilize. It demands constant reaffirmation, transforming life into a perpetual test of loyalty. The organizational structures that sustain this ideology are equally significant. In both Nazi Germany and inquisitorial Spain, institutions function not only as instruments of enforcement but as channels of participation. The involvement of ordinary individuals—through denunciations, confessions, and public rituals—integrates the population into the system's operation. Power is not imposed from above alone; it is reproduced through the actions of those who inhabit it. The banal routines of reporting, observing, and conforming become the mechanisms through which totality is maintained. In Spain, this integration reaches a particularly intense form. The network of inquisitors, clergy, and local informants creates a dense web of surveillance that penetrates even the most remote areas. The edicts of faith, with their detailed catalogues of prohibited behaviors, transform everyday life into a field of potential transgression. The population is not merely subject to control; it becomes an active participant in its extension. The line between victim and agent blurs, as individuals navigate a system in which survival often depends on complicity.

Public rituals such as the auto de fe crystallize the relationship between ideology and spectacle. These events do not simply enforce compliance; they dramatize it, transforming punishment into a collective experience that reinforces the regime's narrative. The spectacle operates as a form of pedagogy, teaching the population how to perceive and interpret reality. Fear is not only induced; it is ritualized, embedded within a framework that presents suffering as both necessary and redemptive. The contrast with France underscores the importance of coherence in the operation of totalizing ideology. Where Spain achieves a high degree of integration between ideology, organization, and practice, France remains fragmented. Internal conflicts within the Church, the limited scope of inquisitorial activity, and the absence of a unified strategy prevent the emergence of a fully totalitarian system. The elements are present, but they do not coalesce into a single, encompassing structure. The role of political religion further illuminates this distinction. In totalitarian systems, belief is not a private matter but a public obligation, enforced through rituals that bind the individual to the collective. The apocalyptic imagery employed in Spain intensifies this binding, framing compliance as a matter of salvation and resistance as a path to damnation. The temporal order of politics is thus fused with the eternal order of religion, creating a system in which deviation acquires cosmic significance.

Fear, within this context, operates as both instrument and atmosphere. It is not limited to specific acts of punishment but permeates the social environment, shaping behavior even in the absence of direct coercion. The possibility of denunciation, the unpredictability of accusation, the visibility of punishment—all contribute to a condition in which individuals internalize the logic of the system. Fear becomes self-sustaining, reproduced through the interactions of those who inhabit it. Extending this analysis, one can see how totalizing ideology transforms the banal into a vehicle of control. The ordinary actions of daily life—eating, speaking, remembering—are reinterpreted as signs of allegiance or betrayal. The distinction between the significant and the insignificant collapses, as every gesture acquires potential meaning within the ideological framework. The banal is no longer neutral; it is saturated with significance, its repetition reinforcing the system's hold. Thus, the totalitarian regime appears as a convergence of elements: an ideology that claims absolute truth, an संगठन that enforces it, a belief system that legitimizes it, and a climate of fear that sustains it. Spain under the Inquisition represents a particularly complete realization of this convergence, where the aspiration to total control extends into every dimension of life. France, by contrast, illustrates the partial and contingent nature of this process, demonstrating that the presence of individual elements is insufficient without their integration.

In this convergence, one encounters the full implications of totalizing ideology. It is not merely a doctrine but a form of life, a system that seeks to redefine reality itself. Its power lies not only in its capacity to coerce but in its ability to organize meaning, to transform the world into a reflection of its own logic. To understand this transformation is to grasp the conditions under which totalitarianism emerges and the mechanisms through which it sustains itself, revealing the profound interplay between belief, power, and the structures of everyday existence.

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The Manufactured Enemy: Germany and the Logic of Non-Banal Evil

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the case of Germany reveals with unsettling clarity that evil within totalitarian systems cannot be reduced to passive obedience or bureaucratic inertia, but must be understood as a structured conviction produced through the convergence of ideology, legitimacy, and state-building. The central mechanism is neither accidental nor merely psychological; it is political in the deepest sense, grounded in the deliberate construction of an existential enemy whose elimination becomes synonymous with the survival of the state.

The emergence of this mechanism is inseparable from the crisis of legitimacy that defined post-World War I Germany. The collapse of the imperial order, the fragility of the Weimar Republic, and the humiliation imposed by the Treaty of Versailles created a vacuum in which the meaning of the nation itself became uncertain. It is within this void that the Nazi regime positioned its ideological apparatus, not simply offering explanations for social and economic instability, but transforming these crises into a coherent narrative of betrayal and threat. The Jew, in this narrative, is not merely an adversary but a metaphysical danger, a figure onto which all contradictions are projected and through which all anxieties are resolved. This transformation marks the shift from

prejudice to political religion. Anti-Semitism, long present in European cultural and religious traditions, is reconfigured into an absolute explanatory system. It absorbs economic contradictions, presenting Jews simultaneously as capitalist exploiters and revolutionary subversives; it resolves political instability by identifying a hidden conspirator behind all forms of dissent; it provides moral clarity by framing violence as defense. The regime does not invent hatred ex nihilo but intensifies and reorganizes it, embedding it within a structure that demands not only belief but participation. The comparison with Spain clarifies the structural logic of this process. In both cases, the state confronts the problem of unity and resolves it through the construction of an internal enemy. The Spanish Inquisition targets conversos and religious minorities to stabilize a newly unified kingdom; the Nazi regime targets Jews and other marginalized groups to consolidate a fractured national identity. In each instance, ideology functions as a binding force, transforming diversity into danger and difference into threat. Yet the Nazi case introduces a distinct modern dimension: the fusion of pseudo-scientific discourse with mythic narrative, creating an ideology that appears both rational and absolute.

The process of dehumanization is central to this transformation. It does not occur as a single act but unfolds gradually, through a series of linguistic, legal, and social shifts that redefine the status of the targeted group. Language plays a decisive role here, as euphemisms and abstractions replace direct references to violence. Deportation becomes resettlement; extermination becomes solution. This linguistic displacement allows perpetrators to distance themselves from the reality of their actions while simultaneously reinforcing the ideological framework that justifies them. At the same time, the legal system participates in this redefinition, stripping Jews of rights and protections, rendering them outside the moral and political community. Public humiliation and exclusion reinforce this process, normalizing the perception of Jews as fundamentally different and inferior. Each step, taken in isolation, may appear limited or even reversible, but together they create a cumulative effect that reshapes perception itself. The victim is no longer seen as a person but as a problem, an obstacle to be managed and ultimately removed. This gradual escalation is what Gregory Hinton describes as a spiral, a movement in which each stage prepares the conditions for the next. The initial acts of discrimination lower the threshold of moral resistance, making subsequent acts of violence appear less extraordinary. The authority of the state, combined with the internalization of its ideology, transforms these acts into obligations rather than choices. Individuals do not simply obey; they come to see their actions as necessary, even virtuous.

The role of belief in this process challenges the notion of banal evil as mere thoughtlessness. While some perpetrators may lack deep ideological commitment, the system as a whole relies on the perception of legitimacy. The regime does not function solely through coercion; it depends on the willingness of individuals to accept its narrative and act within its framework. This acceptance can take many forms, from enthusiastic participation to reluctant compliance, but in each case it reflects an engagement with the ideological structure rather than its absence. The example of Reserve Police Battalion 101 illustrates this complexity. These men were not uniformly indoctrinated zealots, yet their actions cannot be explained by passivity alone. They operated within a context in which authority, peer pressure, and ideological framing converged, creating a situation in which refusal became increasingly difficult and participation increasingly normalized. Their behavior reveals how ordinary individuals can become agents of extraordinary violence, not because they are devoid of thought, but because their thinking has been shaped and constrained by a system that defines violence as necessary. Comparative cases further illuminate the conditions under which this process succeeds or fails. In France and Sweden, the absence of a legitimacy crisis of similar magnitude limited the effectiveness of scapegoating strategies. Without the need to construct a unifying enemy, these states maintained a more pluralistic political environment in

which ideological absolutism could not take hold. Denmark's resistance to Nazi deportation policies demonstrates how alternative moral frameworks can disrupt the logic of dehumanization, while the varying degrees of collaboration in Eastern Europe highlight the importance of pre-existing cultural and political conditions.

These variations underscore the central argument: evil within totalitarian systems is not banal in the sense of being trivial or thoughtless, but is structured, cultivated, and sustained through a complex interplay of ideology, legitimacy, and social context. The perpetrators are not merely cogs in a machine; they are participants in a system that redefines reality and reorients moral judgment. Their actions, however horrific, are experienced within that system as coherent and justified. To recognize this is not to absolve responsibility but to deepen the analysis of how such responsibility is constructed and exercised. The danger lies not only in obedience but in belief, not only in conformity but in conviction. The Nazi regime demonstrates how a political system can transform the perception of reality to such an extent that destruction appears as preservation, and murder as necessity. In this transformation, the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary collapses. The everyday practices of administration, communication, and social interaction become the means through which ideology is enacted. The banal is not absent but reconfigured, serving as the medium through which non-banal evil is realized. It is precisely in this convergence that the true horror of totalitarianism emerges: not in the suspension of normality, but in its redefinition, where the most extreme acts are carried out within a framework that renders them both intelligible and acceptable.

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The Myth of the Ordinary: Ideological Formation and the Violence of Participation

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the question of how ordinary Nazi perpetrators truly were becomes a decisive point of rupture with the comforting illusion that genocide can be explained through passivity, conformity, or bureaucratic distance. The evidence forces a more unsettling conclusion: the machinery of destruction did not rely primarily on detached administrators, but on individuals whose proximity to violence, ideological formation, and institutional trajectories placed them in direct, often intimate engagement with killing.

The dominant image of industrialized extermination—the mechanized death of gas chambers and camps—obscures a far more immediate and embodied reality. A substantial proportion of victims were not processed through technological systems but murdered face to face. Shooting squads, police units, and auxiliary forces carried out killings at close range, often in forests, fields, and villages. This proximity collapses the distance that the notion of banal evil presupposes. The perpetrator does not merely follow orders within an abstract system; he sees, hears, and confronts the victim. Violence here is not mediated but enacted, not diffused but concentrated in the individual act. This shift from abstraction to immediacy demands a reconsideration of the category of the ordinary. If ordinary implies a lack of ideological commitment or exceptional disposition,

then the historical record complicates such a classification. Many perpetrators were embedded in long trajectories of violence and ideological alignment. Figures such as Rudolf Höss illustrate how the path to genocide was not accidental but cumulative, shaped by successive affiliations with militarized and nationalist organizations. The continuity between wartime experience, paramilitary engagement, and participation in the Nazi apparatus reveals a process of gradual normalization, in which violence becomes not an aberration but a professional and moral horizon. Even those who appear less ideologically committed are situated within institutional environments that actively produce and reinforce particular dispositions. The category of "street-level bureaucrats" exposes the inadequacy of distinguishing sharply between planners and executors. Individuals such as police officers, administrators, and mid-level officials do not simply transmit orders; they interpret, adapt, and implement policies within concrete situations. Their actions require initiative, judgment, and often improvisation. The bureaucratic structure does not eliminate agency but redistributes it, embedding it within a framework that directs its exercise toward destructive ends.

The debate between interpretations emphasizing ideological conviction and those stressing situational factors further reveals the complexity of participation. While group pressure, careerism, and conformity undoubtedly shape behavior, they operate within a context already saturated by ideological narratives. The absence of severe punishment for refusal in some cases underscores this point. Participation cannot be explained solely by coercion if abstention remains possible. Instead, it reflects a convergence of motivations in which personal ambition, social belonging, and ideological acceptance intersect. The individual does not merely submit to the system but finds within it a structure that aligns with his interests, fears, or beliefs. Institutional selection and training processes intensify this alignment. Recruitment into police and paramilitary units was not random but filtered through criteria that favored discipline, obedience, and ideological reliability. Training programs and ongoing indoctrination further shaped these dispositions, embedding anti-Semitic and authoritarian values within the professional identity of the participants. The integration of police forces into the broader apparatus of the SS exemplifies this transformation, as institutional boundaries dissolve and the logic of racial ideology permeates all levels of enforcement. The role of ideology here is not secondary but constitutive. It provides the interpretive framework through which actions are understood and justified. Early directives encouraging ruthless violence against perceived enemies establish a norm that redefines the limits of acceptable behavior. Over time, repeated exposure to such directives, combined with participation in escalating acts of repression, produces a moral recalibration. What initially appears extreme becomes routine; what once required justification becomes self-evident.

This process is reinforced by the systematic dehumanization of victims. Propaganda, legal discrimination, and social exclusion work together to strip targeted groups of their status as moral subjects. Dehumanization is not merely a rhetorical device but a cognitive and emotional restructuring that allows perpetrators to perceive violence as necessary or even beneficial. The victim is no longer encountered as an individual but as a representative of a threat, an obstacle to be removed for the greater good. Regional and cultural variations further complicate the notion of ordinariness. Differences in historical traditions, political movements, and religious influences shape the intensity and form of ideological commitment. In some contexts, pre-existing currents of racial or ethnic nationalism amplify the regime's message, producing higher levels of enthusiasm for its policies. In others, the ideological alignment is less intense but still sufficient to sustain participation. These variations demonstrate that the capacity for violence is not evenly distributed but mediated by specific historical and cultural configurations. The contrast with stable political systems highlights the importance of structural context. In societies where legitimacy does not depend on the construction of an existential enemy, the incentives for participation in

systematic violence are significantly reduced. Bureaucracies that are less ideologically driven and more institutionally autonomous provide space for individual moral judgment, limiting the extent to which state directives can override personal convictions. This comparison underscores that the transformation of ordinary individuals into perpetrators is not inevitable but contingent upon the interaction between individual dispositions and systemic pressures.

Ultimately, the persistence of the label "ordinary" risks obscuring the processes that make such participation possible. It suggests a neutrality or universality that dissolves the specificity of ideological formation and institutional socialization. The perpetrators were not simply drawn from the general population without distinction; many were shaped by environments that cultivated particular forms of thinking, feeling, and acting. Their actions, while carried out by human beings who may in other contexts appear unremarkable, were enabled by a convergence of factors that rendered violence both intelligible and legitimate. The challenge, then, is not to deny the humanity of the perpetrators but to understand how that humanity is configured within systems that redefine moral boundaries. The danger lies not in the existence of ordinary individuals, but in the conditions under which ordinariness is reoriented toward destruction. When ideology, institution, and experience align, the distance between the everyday and the catastrophic collapses, revealing that what appears banal on the surface may conceal a deeply structured and actively sustained form of evil.

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Legitimacy Against Catastrophe: Germany, Sweden, and the Structural Limits of Totalitarianism

In Steven Saxonberg's Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, the contrast between Germany and Sweden crystallizes into a decisive argument: totalitarianism is not the inevitable product of ideology or prejudice alone, but the outcome of specific structural conditions rooted in legitimacy, state formation, and institutional culture. The divergence between the two nations exposes the deeper architecture through which societies either descend into systemic violence or resist its emergence.

Germany's trajectory is marked by a fundamental instability at the core of its political identity. The unification of 1871 produced a state that was formally consolidated but internally fragmented, lacking a deeply rooted sense of shared legitimacy. Regional loyalties, aristocratic dominance, and a bureaucratic culture oriented toward obedience rather than democratic accountability created a fragile political organism. When the Weimar Republic emerged from the ruins of imperial collapse, it inherited not only institutional weaknesses but also the symbolic burden of defeat, economic crisis, and perceived humiliation. Legitimacy was not merely weakened; it was actively contested. Into this vacuum entered a political force capable of transforming crisis into coherence. The Nazi movement did not simply exploit dissatisfaction; it restructured it into a totalizing narrative. By identifying Jews and other groups as existential threats, it provided a unifying principle that transcended regional, class, and ideological divisions. This transformation of

political conflict into a quasi-religious struggle redefined the purpose of the state itself. Legitimacy was no longer derived from democratic consent or institutional continuity but from the promise of national salvation. The state became both the instrument and the embodiment of this mission. Sweden, by contrast, presents a radically different configuration. Its political order was not free from tension or inequality, but it rested on a long-established foundation of legitimacy that could absorb shocks without collapsing into crisis. The loss of Finland in 1809, a potentially destabilizing event, was followed not by scapegoating or radicalization but by administrative reform and gradual democratization. Political actors operated within a framework that prioritized consensus and inclusion, allowing conflicts to be negotiated rather than existentialized. In such a context, the transformation of political disagreement into totalizing ideology found little fertile ground.

The contrast extends into the structure and function of bureaucracy. In Germany, the civil service carried forward traditions of hierarchical obedience and loyalty to authority, readily aligning itself with the new regime once it appeared legitimate. This alignment was not purely opportunistic; it reflected a deeper compatibility between bureaucratic culture and authoritarian governance. The administrative apparatus became a crucial vector through which ideological directives were translated into concrete policies, enabling the systematic implementation of exclusion, repression, and ultimately extermination. In Sweden, the bureaucratic ethos operated differently. Greater autonomy, meritocratic principles, and a weaker attachment to ideological conformity allowed civil servants to exercise judgment independent of political pressure. This institutional culture created a buffer between state directives and individual action, preserving space for moral agency. The difference is not merely procedural but structural: where one system integrates bureaucracy into the logic of total domination, the other maintains a degree of separation that limits the reach of political ideology. The role of anti-Semitism further illustrates the importance of context. Prejudices existed in both societies, yet their political activation diverged sharply. In Germany, anti-Semitism was elevated into a central organizing principle of the state, intensified through propaganda and embedded within a comprehensive ideological framework. It became not just a belief but a mandate, transforming social hostility into political action. In Sweden, similar prejudices lacked this institutional amplification. Without a crisis of legitimacy requiring scapegoats, they remained peripheral, unable to coalesce into a program of systematic exclusion or violence.

This divergence reshapes the understanding of perpetrators themselves. In Germany, participation in the machinery of violence was facilitated by a convergence of ideological commitment, institutional pressure, and perceived legitimacy. Individuals did not act in a vacuum; they operated within a system that framed their actions as necessary and justified. Even those motivated by career considerations or conformity were embedded in a structure that normalized and rewarded participation. In Sweden, the absence of such a structure limited the conditions under which individuals could be mobilized toward systemic harm. The broader implication is that totalitarianism emerges not from isolated elements—ideology, prejudice, or individual disposition—but from their alignment within a specific structural configuration. Newly formed or destabilized states face acute pressures to define identity and secure loyalty. When legitimacy is weak, the temptation to unify the population through the construction of an existential enemy becomes powerful. This process transforms social tensions into political absolutes, creating the conditions under which totalizing ideologies can flourish. Stable states, by contrast, possess resources that mitigate these dynamics. Institutional continuity, inclusive political practices, and established legitimacy reduce the need for radical solutions to crises. Conflicts can be managed within existing frameworks rather than redefined as threats to collective survival. The absence of

such pressures does not eliminate prejudice or inequality, but it limits their transformation into instruments of state policy.

The comparison between Germany and Sweden thus challenges deterministic narratives of totalitarianism. It demonstrates that even in societies sharing certain ideological tendencies, outcomes can diverge dramatically depending on structural conditions. Totalitarianism is neither an inevitable culmination of modernity nor a simple expression of cultural traits. It is a contingent formation, arising at the intersection of legitimacy crises, state-building processes, and institutional alignments. This insight carries a profound warning. The conditions that enabled the German descent into totalitarianism are not confined to a single historical moment. Whenever legitimacy erodes, institutions weaken, and political actors seek unity through exclusion, the structural foundations of total domination begin to reappear. Conversely, the resilience demonstrated by Sweden underscores the importance of maintaining robust, inclusive, and autonomous institutions capable of resisting such transformations. In this sense, the study of these two trajectories is not merely historical but diagnostic. It reveals the underlying mechanisms through which societies either sustain pluralism or succumb to totalizing visions. The difference between catastrophe and resistance lies not in the absence of conflict, but in the structures through which conflict is interpreted and resolved.

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Beyond the Human Horizon: Speculation as the Last Philosophy of Limits

In Asher Seidel's Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity, the project of thinking is pushed to its outermost boundary, where the human condition ceases to be the unquestioned ground of philosophy and becomes instead its provisional starting point. The work does not concern itself with cruelty or moral monstrosity in the conventional sense of inhumanity; rather, it interrogates the possibility that the human itself is an incomplete form, a transitional configuration awaiting transformation into something structurally and cognitively other.

The provocation lies not merely in imagining change, but in reversing the moral intuition that binds us to the human as a normative horizon. What if the abandonment of human limitations—biological, emotional, cognitive—is not a loss but a gain? Such a proposition destabilizes the inherited moral architecture that equates humanity with value, forcing thought into a domain where enhancement shades into erasure, and continuity dissolves into rupture. The "inhuman" becomes not the negation of ethics, but its displacement into an unfamiliar register. This displacement is not without precedent. The philosophical tradition has long entertained the possibility that human embodiment constrains knowledge and truth. In Plato's Phaedo, the body is not the ground of wisdom but its obstacle, a site of distraction that must be transcended if the soul is to encounter reality without distortion. Seidel's speculative trajectory radicalizes this Platonic gesture by extending it beyond metaphysical dualism into technological and post-biological futures. The soul's liberation is no longer an abstract ideal but a potential engineering problem. Yet the work does not simply replicate Nietzsche's call for the Übermensch. Where Nietzsche imagines a transformation rooted in will, value creation, and existential overcoming, Seidel explores a more diffuse and technologically mediated evolution. The transition from human to non-human is not framed as a heroic act but as an emergent process, driven by incremental modifications that accumulate into qualitative difference. Enhancement becomes the mechanism through which identity dissolves, and the human gradually becomes unrecognizable to itself.

This process unfolds along several axes, each targeting a foundational limitation of human existence. The extension of lifespan challenges the temporal structure within which meaning is traditionally organized. Mortality, often regarded as the condition that gives urgency and coherence to life, becomes optional or obsolete. In its absence, the question arises whether meaning persists or dissipates into an endless present. The prospect of immortality does not simply extend life; it transforms the very logic through which life is understood. Similarly, the notion of parallel consciousness disrupts the unity of the subject. Human cognition, typically experienced as linear and sequential, is reimagined as multiplicity—simultaneous streams of thought operating without mutual interference. Such a transformation would dissolve the coherence of personal identity as it is currently conceived. The self would no longer be a singular locus of experience but a distributed system, raising the question of whether continuity of consciousness can survive such fragmentation. The speculative elimination of desire—particularly sexual desire and the need for companionship—pushes this transformation further. Human sociality, deeply rooted in biological drives and emotional dependencies, is reconfigured into a state of autonomy that borders on isolation. The absence of desire promises freedom from certain forms of suffering, yet it also threatens to eliminate the relational structures through which meaning is generated. A world without longing may also be a world without attachment, without narrative, without the tensions that animate existence.

These scenarios, while seemingly extreme, serve a philosophical function that extends beyond their plausibility. They expose the contingency of what is often taken as essential. By imagining the removal or alteration of fundamental human traits, the work reveals how deeply our concepts of identity, morality, and value are tied to specific biological and cognitive conditions. The human is not a fixed essence but a configuration that can, at least in thought, be otherwise. The critique that such speculation is utopian or escapist fails to grasp its methodological significance. Speculative philosophy operates not as prediction but as a form of conceptual experimentation. It constructs scenarios that, regardless of their empirical likelihood, illuminate the structures of the present by projecting their transformation. Just as early science fiction appears naïve in its technical details yet profound in its imaginative reach, philosophical speculation gains its value not from accuracy but from its capacity to reframe the possible. This reframing also intersects with the conditions of intellectual production itself. Speculation, often dismissed as socially unproductive, occupies a space analogous to art: a domain where ideas are pursued for their intrinsic interest rather than their immediate utility. In societies capable of sustaining such activity, speculative thought becomes a marker of excess capacity, a sign that not all intellectual labor must be subordinated to practical ends. Its “uselessness” is, paradoxically, what allows it to explore possibilities that instrumental reasoning would exclude.

Yet the ethical dimension cannot be entirely suspended. Even in imagined futures where traditional moral concerns appear obsolete, the question of harm persists. The transformation of the human raises issues of consent, continuity, and inequality. Who undergoes enhancement, and under what conditions? What happens to those who remain unmodified? Does the emergence of post-human entities create a new hierarchy, replacing old forms of domination with new ones? The displacement of humanity does not eliminate ethics but relocates it within a transformed landscape. At its core, this project originates in a recognition of limitation. The observation of cognitive constraints—of the difficulty individuals face in mastering even relatively simple forms of reasoning—becomes the initial impulse for imagining improvement. From this modest beginning, the inquiry expands, moving from enhancement to transformation, from the correction of deficiencies to the redefinition of the human itself. The trajectory is not linear but exponential, each step opening new questions that exceed the scope of the previous one. What emerges is a

paradox. The more we attempt to overcome human limitations, the more we risk losing the very framework within which those limitations are meaningful. Improvement, taken to its logical extreme, becomes indistinguishable from replacement. The human is not perfected but superseded, leaving behind a residue of questions that cannot be fully resolved within the new condition.

In this sense, the work does not offer a program but a provocation. It invites us to consider whether the boundaries of the human are constraints to be transcended or conditions to be preserved. It challenges the assumption that more capacity—more life, more thought, more control—necessarily leads to a better existence. And it confronts us with the possibility that the future of humanity may not be human at all, but something that renders our current categories obsolete. The ultimate significance of such speculation lies not in its predictions but in its capacity to unsettle. By projecting the dissolution of the human, it forces a reconsideration of what it means to think, to feel, and to exist within the limits we currently inhabit. The inhuman, in this context, is not an external threat but an internal horizon—the point at which humanity encounters its own transcendence and must decide whether to cross it.

Seidel, A. (2014) Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

Toward a System That Changes Life: Ethics Beyond Refinement

In Asher Seidel's Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity, the question of ethics is reopened not as a matter of rules or dilemmas, but as a problem of scale, ambition, and transformation. To ask what the point of ethics is, in this context, is not to seek a definition but to confront a dissatisfaction: that ethics, despite its conceptual sophistication, has rarely altered the structure of human life in a way comparable to the transformative power of science. It clarifies, distinguishes, and adjudicates—but does it fundamentally change how we live?

The traditional answers—guiding action, resolving dilemmas, distinguishing right from wrong—are not rejected, but they are revealed as insufficient. They operate within a given framework of human life, assuming its limits, desires, and structures as fixed. Yet if the human itself is mutable, as the broader project of posthuman speculation suggests, then ethics confined to the present form of humanity becomes a local and provisional discourse. It regulates what is, but does not imagine what could be. This limitation parallels a similar tension in epistemology. Just as debates over skepticism and justification can become self-enclosed, ethics risks turning inward, refining its vocabulary without expanding its horizon. The proliferation of distinctions—between deontology and utilitarianism, between rights and consequences—produces precision but not necessarily progress. The field becomes increasingly adept at answering its own questions while neglecting the possibility of posing new ones. The call, then, is not for abandonment but for expansion. Ethics must move from a discipline of clarification to a discipline of construction. It must not only analyze moral life but attempt to redesign it. This shift requires a reorientation from reactive to proactive thinking: from responding to dilemmas within existing conditions to envisioning conditions under which different forms of life—and different forms of value—become possible.

Here the return to Plato is not antiquarian but strategic. In the Republic, ethical inquiry is inseparable from the construction of a total vision of life. Concepts such as justice, courage, and moderation are not treated as isolated virtues but as components of an integrated system that defines both individual flourishing and collective order. The ambition is not merely to describe moral intuitions but to reorganize them into a coherent structure capable of guiding an entire way of life. This ambition, however, remains incomplete. Plato's system is constrained by the material

and conceptual limits of his time, and its hypothetical nature leaves many relations underdeveloped. Yet its methodological significance endures. It suggests that ethics can aspire to the kind of systematic integration that characterizes successful scientific theories. Just as physics unifies disparate phenomena under a coherent set of principles, ethics could, in principle, unify moral, psychological, and social concepts into a framework that is both explanatory and transformative. The comparison with science is deliberately provocative. Science achieved its transformative power not merely through accumulation of knowledge but through integration—linking concepts such as force, mass, and motion into a system that enabled prediction and control. Ethics, by contrast, has often remained fragmented. Aristotle refines virtues without fully integrating them into a predictive system; Kant constructs a rigorous account of duty while excluding considerations of happiness; Mill centers morality on utility but leaves other dimensions of human life underdeveloped. Each provides insight, but none produces a comprehensive architecture capable of reshaping life as a whole.

The closest approximation to such integration may be found in Spinoza, whose Ethics attempts to weave together metaphysics, psychology, and morality into a unified structure. Yet even here, the aspiration remains largely theoretical, lacking the broader societal project that would translate system into transformation. The gap between understanding and application persists. To close this gap, ethics must confront several interrelated challenges. The first is integration: the need to relate ethical concepts not as isolated categories but as elements of a dynamic system. The second is relevance: the necessity of addressing the conditions of modern life, from technological transformation to global inequality, without reducing ethics to a series of case studies. The third is an adequate account of human nature—one that incorporates insights from psychology, neuroscience, and sociology, and recognizes that this "nature" may itself be subject to change. The fourth is implementation: the translation of ethical theory into practices, institutions, and forms of life that embody its principles. These challenges are intensified by the prospect of posthuman transformation. If cognitive enhancement, extended lifespans, or altered emotional structures become possible, the very parameters within which ethical questions are posed will shift. Concepts such as happiness, autonomy, and responsibility may require redefinition. Ethics can no longer assume a stable subject; it must anticipate subjects that do not yet exist.

This anticipation does not imply a descent into speculation detached from reality. Rather, it reflects an expansion of ethical inquiry to include the design of future conditions. The question is no longer only how we ought to act, but what kinds of beings we ought to become. This shift transforms ethics from a reactive discipline into a creative one, concerned not only with judgment but with possibility. Critics may view such ambitions as utopian or even misguided, arguing that ethics, unlike science, cannot achieve consensus or predictive power. Yet this objection presupposes that the current limitations of ethics are permanent. The history of science itself suggests otherwise: what once appeared speculative or impractical can, under the right conditions, become foundational. The absence of a unified ethical system is not evidence of impossibility but of an unfinished project. A revolutionary ethics, in this sense, requires both boldness and restraint. Boldness in its willingness to rethink fundamental assumptions and explore new forms of life; restraint in its recognition that transformation carries risks, including the erosion of values that give human life its meaning. The integration of interdisciplinary insights—drawing from biology, technology, and social theory—must be balanced by a critical awareness of the ethical implications of such integration.

Ultimately, the point of ethics, in this expanded vision, is not merely to guide action within the world as it is, but to participate in the creation of the world as it could be. It is an attempt to align

understanding, value, and practice in a way that reshapes both individual existence and collective life. Whether such a project can succeed remains uncertain. But its pursuit redefines the scope of ethics itself, transforming it from a discipline of limits into a discipline of horizons.

Seidel, A. (2014) Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

The Grammar of Humiliation: How Dignity Appears Only When It Is Broken

In the introductory reflections of the volume Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated, the concept of dignity is displaced from its familiar philosophical pedestal and returned to the site where it is most urgently felt—not in abstraction, but in injury. The text proposes that dignity is not first encountered as a principle but as a wound; not as a definition, but as a violation. This reversal is decisive. It suggests that dignity does not originate in theory but in experience, in those moments when something in the human condition is unmistakably diminished, denied, or destroyed.

The classical lineage of dignity—from Pico della Mirandola's exaltation of human potential to Immanuel Kant's grounding of morality in rational autonomy—established it as a foundational value, intrinsic and universal. Yet precisely this elevation has rendered it opaque. When dignity is treated as an unquestionable ground, it becomes conceptually overburdened and experientially distant. It is invoked everywhere—in constitutions, declarations, and ethical debates—yet remains strangely elusive, as if its very universality has emptied it of concrete meaning. The negative approach intervenes at this point of exhaustion. Rather than asking what dignity is in itself, it asks when and how it is violated. This shift from ontology to phenomenology—from essence to experience—transforms the inquiry. Dignity is no longer a static property but a dynamic relation, something that becomes visible only in its breakdown. To understand dignity, one must therefore attend to humiliation, degradation, and dehumanization—not as secondary phenomena, but as primary sites of revelation. This perspective aligns with the insight, articulated most forcefully by Avishai Margalit, that a decent society is defined not by the abstract affirmation of dignity but by the absence of institutions that humiliate. The emphasis is not on what dignity ideally is, but on what it means to strip it away. In this sense, humiliation functions as a kind of moral grammar: it reveals the rules of human recognition precisely by violating them.

The strength of this approach lies in its refusal of false dichotomies. Philosophical debates have often oscillated between two extremes: dignity as an ultimate metaphysical foundation, or dignity as an empty rhetorical flourish. Both positions share a common limitation—they detach dignity from the contexts in which it matters. By contrast, the negative approach insists that dignity is neither self-evident nor meaningless; it is situational, relational, and historically embedded. It is constituted through practices—legal, social, political—that either sustain or undermine it. This insistence becomes particularly evident when one considers the range of phenomena examined under the rubric of dignity violations. Torture, poverty, rape, forced labor, and social exclusion are not merely injustices; they are degradations that target the very status of the person. They do not simply harm individuals but reposition them within a hierarchy of worth, transforming them into objects, instruments, or non-persons. In this sense, dignity is inseparable from recognition. To violate dignity is to deny recognition—not only in the legal sense, but in the deeper, existential sense of being acknowledged as a bearer of value. Yet recognition itself is ambivalent. As some contributions to the volume suggest, the human need for recognition can lead individuals to accept humiliation rather than face invisibility. This paradox complicates any straightforward account of

dignity. It reveals that dignity is not only threatened by overt violence but also by subtle forms of symbolic domination, where individuals internalize their own degradation in exchange for minimal inclusion. Here, the banal language of social life—its euphemisms, clichés, and administrative categories—plays a crucial role. It normalizes inequality and masks humiliation, transforming violations into routine.

In this respect, the negative approach intersects with a broader critique of banality. Just as banal language dulls the perception of inequality, it also obscures the experience of dignity violations. Terms like "underprivileged" or "socially excluded" can depersonalize suffering, converting lived humiliation into abstract categories. The violence remains, but its immediacy is lost. Dignity, once again, disappears—not because it is absent, but because it is linguistically neutralized. The emphasis on concrete violations also expands the scope of dignity beyond the individual. Traditional accounts, particularly those rooted in Kantian autonomy, tend to focus on the individual as the primary bearer of dignity. The negative approach, however, reveals the importance of collective and relational dimensions. Entire groups can be humiliated, stigmatized, or dehumanized, not merely as aggregates of individuals but as social entities. Practices such as the manipulation of names under totalitarian regimes, or the systematic exclusion of communities from economic and political life, illustrate how dignity operates at multiple levels simultaneously. This multi-layered understanding challenges the assumption that dignity can be fully captured by a single theoretical framework. The contributions to the volume do not converge on a unified theory; instead, they offer a plurality of perspectives that reflect the complexity of the phenomenon. This plurality is not a weakness but a methodological necessity. If dignity is revealed through diverse forms of violation, then any adequate account must remain open to this diversity.

At the same time, the negative approach does not abandon theory. It provides what might be called the raw material for theoretical reconstruction. By grounding abstract concepts in lived experience, it enables a more responsive and context-sensitive form of theorizing. Philosophical accounts of dignity can then be evaluated not only for their internal coherence but for their ability to illuminate and address real-world injustices. What emerges, ultimately, is a redefinition of dignity itself. It is no longer a fixed property possessed by individuals simply by virtue of being human. Nor is it a purely subjective feeling. It is a fragile and contested status, continuously produced and threatened within social relations. It exists in the space between recognition and its denial, between the affirmation of humanity and its erosion. This redefinition carries significant implications. It suggests that the defense of dignity cannot rely solely on declarations or principles. It requires attention to practices—legal, economic, cultural—that shape the conditions of human life. It demands vigilance against both spectacular and banal forms of degradation. And it calls for a rethinking of ethical discourse itself, moving from abstract foundations to concrete engagements with the realities of suffering and injustice.

In this sense, the negative approach does not diminish the importance of dignity; it restores it. By locating dignity in the lived experience of its violation, it returns the concept to the domain where it has the greatest moral force. Dignity becomes not an abstract ideal to be proclaimed, but a condition to be protected—a condition that is most clearly understood when it is under threat.

Margalit, A. (1996) The Decent Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Neuhaeuser, C., Webster, E. and Ebooks Corporation (2011). Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization. Dordrecht: Springer.

The Dirty Cloth and the Invisible Crime: On the Intimate Grammar of Degradation

In the opening provocation of the chapter Introduction from Human Dignity Violated, the seemingly trivial act described by Temsch becomes philosophically explosive: a caregiver, entrusted with the most intimate forms of human vulnerability, deliberately reverses the order of care—using what is designated for the lowest part of the body to cleanse the face. Nothing visible is damaged, no pain is inflicted, no complaint is voiced. And yet the act appears unmistakably wrong. The force of this wrongness does not reside in consequence, nor even primarily in consent. It resides in degradation.

This example exposes a blind spot in much of moral philosophy. Consequentialism falters because no measurable harm occurs; autonomy-based frameworks hesitate because the victim cannot register the violation. Yet our moral intuition does not hesitate. It recoils. This recoil is not irrational—it signals the presence of a category that exceeds harm and consent. It signals dignity. What is decisive in the anecdote is not the physical act itself but the symbolic inversion it performs. The human body is not merely biological; it is ordered, hierarchized, and culturally coded. The face, as the locus of recognition, identity, and personhood, occupies a privileged position. To treat it as equivalent to what is culturally marked as abject is not to cause pain but to collapse distinction. And this collapse is precisely what degradation does: it erases the symbolic boundary that sustains the human as human. In this sense, degradation is not reducible to suffering. It is a reclassification. It transforms a subject into something less than a subject—not through violence, but through a subtle rearrangement of meaning. The elderly man, unaware of the act, is nonetheless repositioned within a hierarchy of worth. He is not harmed in the empirical sense; he is diminished in the symbolic sense. And this diminution is what we experience as morally intolerable. The example thus confirms the necessity of what may be called the negative turn in the analysis of dignity. Rather than asking what dignity is in abstraction, we begin with what it means to violate it. The violation reveals what the concept protects. It shows that dignity is not merely about rights or interests but about the preservation of a minimal structure of recognition—a structure that can be undermined even in the absence of pain or awareness. This insight resonates with the broader philosophical trajectory of dignity, from its origins in Roman dignitas to its transformation in modern ethical and legal discourse. In its Roman form, dignity was a matter of rank and status, unevenly distributed and socially enforced. With the rise of the biblical and later Kantian traditions, dignity becomes universalized: every human being is endowed with an intrinsic worth that demands respect. Yet this universalization introduces a paradox. If dignity is always present, how can it be violated?

The negative approach resolves this paradox by distinguishing between possession and recognition. Dignity, as a moral status, may be inalienable, but its social realization is not. It depends on practices—rituals of care, forms of address, institutional arrangements—that affirm or deny it. The caregiver's act does not strip the elderly man of dignity in the metaphysical sense; it fails to recognize it in the practical sense. And this failure is sufficient to constitute a moral wrong. Here, the analysis converges with the thought of Immanuel Kant, who famously distinguished between things that have a price and those that have dignity. To treat a person with dignity is to treat them as an end in themselves, never merely as a means. Yet the anecdote reveals that even this formulation requires supplementation. The caregiver does not use the patient as a means; rather, he expresses contempt through a symbolic act. The violation is not instrumental but expressive. It communicates something about the worth of the person, and it is this communication that constitutes the wrong. This expressive dimension complicates any attempt to reduce dignity to autonomy or rationality. The elderly man, due to dementia, cannot exercise autonomy in the Kantian sense. If dignity depended solely on rational agency, his case would be morally

ambiguous. Yet our judgment is unequivocal. This suggests that dignity must be grounded not only in capacities but in a more fundamental status—one that persists even when capacities are diminished or absent. At the same time, the anecdote exposes the fragility of this status. Dignity is not self-enforcing; it requires constant reaffirmation through practice. The routines of care, the distinctions between clean and unclean, the gestures of respect—these are not trivial details but the microstructures through which dignity is sustained. When they are inverted, even in secrecy, the structure collapses.

This brings us to the inductive turn. By examining a wide range of cases—humiliation, torture, poverty, exclusion—we begin to see recurring patterns. Dignity violations often involve the same operations: the erosion of boundaries, the imposition of asymmetry, the denial of recognition. Whether in the brutality of torture or the subtlety of everyday indignities, the underlying logic is similar. The person is repositioned within a hierarchy that denies their equal worth. The historical turn further deepens this understanding. The modern concept of universal dignity inherits elements from earlier notions of honor and nobility. In these earlier frameworks, dignity was not a universal attribute but a marker of distinction. To possess dignity was to occupy a higher rank. The contemporary ideal of universal dignity can thus be seen as a radical democratization of nobility: every person is to be treated as if they possessed the highest rank. The caregiver's act, then, is not merely disrespectful; it is a betrayal of this democratized nobility. It reintroduces hierarchy where none should exist, assigning the patient a lower status through a symbolic gesture. The wrongness of the act lies in this re-hierarchization, this quiet reassertion of inequality in a context where equality is morally required. From this perspective, dignity can be redefined as the protection of a minimally decent identity. This identity is not a psychological construct but a normative one. It consists in being recognized as a person who is not to be humiliated, degraded, or treated as less than human. Violations of dignity are thus violations of identity in this normative sense—they undermine the conditions under which a person can be regarded, by themselves and others, as a bearer of worth.

This redefinition also clarifies why dignity remains indispensable despite philosophical skepticism. Critics who dismiss the concept as vague or redundant often overlook the phenomena it captures. Terms like harm, autonomy, or rights can describe certain aspects of moral wrongness, but they fail to account for the specific kind of violation exemplified in the anecdote. They cannot fully explain why an act that causes no harm and bypasses consent can still be profoundly wrong. Dignity fills this gap. It names the dimension of moral life concerned with recognition, status, and symbolic order. It captures the intuition that some actions are wrong not because they harm or coerce, but because they degrade. And this intuition, far from being irrational, reflects a deep understanding of what it means to be human. The anecdote, in its simplicity, thus performs a philosophical function. It forces us to confront the limits of our theories and to reconsider the foundations of our moral judgments. It shows that dignity is not an abstract ideal imposed from above but a lived reality, continuously affirmed or denied in the smallest gestures of everyday life.

In the end, the dirty cloth becomes more than an object. It becomes a symbol of the fragile boundary between respect and degradation, between recognition and its absence. It reminds us that dignity is not secured once and for all but must be enacted, again and again, in the practices through which we relate to one another. And it warns us that even the most banal actions can carry the weight of profound moral significance, revealing—precisely in their triviality—the hidden structure of human worth.

Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Neuhaeuser, C., Webster, E. and Ebooks Corporation (2011). Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization. Dordrecht: Springer.

3. PHATIC SPEECH

The Ritual of Empty Speech: Language as Social Glue and Semantic Void

Drawing on the foundational insights of Bronisław Malinowski and Roman Jakobson, language is presented not as a vehicle of meaning but as a mechanism of contact, a subtle instrument for sustaining the fragile thread of social existence. A phatic expression designates a form of utterance whose primary function is not to inform but to connect, not to communicate content but to affirm presence. It belongs to that vast domain of speech in which words are spoken without the burden of truth, without the demand for relevance, and often without any expectation of response beyond the ritual acknowledgment of shared participation. Such expressions populate everyday life: greetings, polite inquiries, conversational fillers, and formulaic exchanges that seem to hover at the threshold of meaning, never quite entering the domain of substance. Their purpose is not to say something but to maintain the possibility of saying anything at all. Within the functional schema proposed by Jakobson, the phatic dimension of language concerns the channel itself, the continuous verification that communication remains open, that the circuit between speakers has not been broken.

When one says that the line is unclear or asks whether one is being heard, the utterance does not advance knowledge but secures the conditions under which knowledge could, in principle, be transmitted. In this sense, phatic speech is meta-communication in its most minimal and yet most pervasive form: it speaks not about the world but about the fact that speech is still occurring. At first glance, such expressions appear to violate the rational expectations codified in the cooperative principles of conversation. They are often redundant, trivially obvious, or even insincere. Yet their apparent emptiness conceals a dense network of social meanings. To ask how someone is, without expecting an honest account, is not a failure of communication but a performance of solidarity. The exchange creates a shared space of mutual recognition, a brief suspension of isolation in which participants affirm their belonging to a common social order. Phatic communion, as Malinowski named it, reveals that language is not merely a tool for representing reality but a practice for constructing and maintaining relationships. Its significance lies precisely in its lack of informational necessity. The history of the concept underscores this paradox. Introduced in the early twentieth century to describe forms of speech in so-called primitive societies, the notion of phatic communion was meant to challenge the assumption that language evolves primarily for the transmission of knowledge. Instead, it highlighted the primordial role of speech in weaving the fabric of social life. The etymological roots of the term, derived from the Greek for speaking and utterance, point to a conception of language as an act before it is a message. What matters is not what is said but that something is said, that the silence separating individuals is momentarily bridged. Across cultures, the specific forms of phatic expression vary, yet their function remains strikingly consistent. A simple question such as how one is doing may oscillate between genuine inquiry and ritual greeting depending on context, tone, and circumstance. The difference is not encoded in the words themselves but emerges from the situation in which they are uttered. In English, the exchange of casual pleasantries often substitutes for deeper engagement, creating a rhythm of interaction that smooths the rough edges of social encounters. In Japanese, highly codified expressions of politeness and gratitude perform a similar role, reinforcing hierarchies and maintaining harmony through linguistic ritual. These variations demonstrate that phatic communication is not a marginal phenomenon but a structural feature of language as such, adapting itself to the norms and expectations of each cultural environment. Beyond verbal language, the phatic dimension extends into the realm of gesture and embodiment. A smile, a nod, a glance, or a wave can function as a complete communicative act without conveying any

propositional content. These non-verbal signals regulate interaction, indicate attentiveness, and establish a minimal form of connection that precedes and often replaces articulated speech. Even involuntary expressions, such as blushing or changes in posture, participate in this silent dialogue, revealing that the maintenance of social bonds operates at multiple levels simultaneously. In the digital sphere, the logic of phatic communication has not diminished but intensified. The simple act of liking a post, leaving a brief comment, or reacting with an emoji serves as a contemporary equivalent of the traditional greeting. These minimal gestures, often devoid of explicit meaning, sustain networks of recognition in environments where physical presence is absent. They are signals of visibility and acknowledgment, tokens that one has seen and been seen. The proliferation of such micro-acts suggests that the need for phatic connection persists even as the forms of communication evolve. In fictional worlds, phatic expressions acquire an almost ceremonial status, functioning as markers of identity and belonging within imagined communities. Repeated phrases, ritual greetings, and formulaic blessings create a sense of cohesion and continuity, transforming language into a symbolic system that binds characters together. These expressions, though often stylized, mirror the same underlying function found in everyday life: the affirmation of a shared order through the repetition of familiar forms. What emerges from this panorama is a conception of language in which meaning is no longer the central axis. Phatic expressions reveal that the majority of human speech operates not in the domain of information but in the domain of relation. They are the linguistic equivalent of a handshake, a gesture that signifies presence without needing to justify itself through content. Yet this insight carries a deeper implication. If language can function effectively without conveying information, then its role as a medium of truth becomes secondary to its role as a medium of social maintenance. The more language is used to sustain connection, the less it is required to bear the weight of meaning. In this light, phatic communication can be understood as a mechanism that gradually transforms language into a system of self-referential signals, where the act of speaking becomes detached from the necessity of saying something. The proliferation of such expressions, especially in contemporary digital environments, suggests a shift toward a form of communication in which the channel is perpetually open but increasingly empty. Speech persists, but its content becomes interchangeable, repetitive, and ultimately dispensable. This transformation does not signal the disappearance of language but its saturation. When every interaction is mediated by phatic rituals, the distinction between meaningful and meaningless speech begins to erode. Language becomes ubiquitous precisely by becoming redundant. It is everywhere, yet it says less and less. In this sense, phatic expression is not merely a peripheral feature of communication but a key to understanding its current condition. It exposes the tendency of language to prioritize connection over content, presence over meaning, repetition over innovation. The result is a communicative landscape in which the maintenance of social bonds takes precedence over the articulation of ideas, and where the very success of language as a social tool contributes to its gradual depletion as a medium of significance. What appears as harmless small talk thus reveals a deeper dynamic: the transformation of language into a continuous background noise that sustains the illusion of connection while silently eroding the substance of communication itself.

Malinowski, B. (1923) The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages, in Ogden, C.K. and Richards, I.A. (eds.) The Meaning of Meaning. London: Routledge.

Typing Into the Void: Contact Without Presence in Instant Messaging

In Dipti Kulkarni's article Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions, published in Discourse & Communication, the classical notion of phatic communion

is transported into the seemingly immaterial space of digital exchange, where language must compensate for the absence of bodies, gestures, and shared physical context. What emerges is not a diminished form of communication but an intensified one, in which the burden of maintaining contact falls almost entirely upon the visible trace of words on a screen. The phatic function, originally conceived as the verification of an open channel between interlocutors, becomes in this environment the very substance of interaction itself. Every message is less a transmission of information than a signal of continued presence, a small assertion that the connection has not yet dissolved into silence. The study proceeds through a close examination of instant messaging conversations, revealing how participants construct and sustain communicative contact through a repertoire of minimal yet highly functional linguistic devices. Openings, middles, and closings are not merely structural components but stages in the delicate choreography of attention. At the beginning of interaction, greetings such as hi or hey operate as ritual keys that unlock the channel, though their absence in certain exchanges suggests that familiarity can render even these minimal forms unnecessary.

The initiation of contact thus oscillates between convention and immediacy, reflecting the elasticity of social distance in digital environments. Once the channel is established, the conversation enters a phase where its continuation depends on a continuous flow of micro-signals. In the absence of non-verbal cues, participants rely on back-channels, brief acknowledgments such as ok or hmm, which do not advance the topic but affirm that the other remains engaged. These utterances are semantically thin yet interactionally dense, performing the essential work of keeping the communicative thread intact. Alongside them, evaluations and expressive responses introduce a layer of affect, transforming the exchange into a space of shared emotional alignment. A simple expression of approval or surprise functions as a substitute for facial expression or tone, reintroducing into the textual medium the nuances of human presence that would otherwise be lost. Questions, too, play a crucial role, not only as requests for information but as mechanisms for prolonging contact. By inviting response, they ensure that the exchange does not collapse into silence, that the fragile continuity of interaction is preserved. The closing phase of conversation reveals perhaps the most striking transformation of phatic norms. While traditional interaction often requires a sequence of farewell rituals to mark the end of contact, instant messaging allows for abrupt termination, an exit without ceremony. Silence itself becomes a permissible form of closure, reflecting the asynchronous nature of the medium. Yet even here, the variability of endings underscores the persistence of phatic concerns: some participants adhere to elaborate goodbyes, while others exploit the technological affordances to withdraw without acknowledgment. The decision to close, and how to do so, becomes another site where social relations are negotiated through language. The study demonstrates that phatic communication does not disappear in the transition to digital media but adapts, redistributing its functions across new forms of expression. The lack of physical co-presence does not eliminate the need for contact; it intensifies it, requiring speakers to produce explicit markers of attention and engagement that would otherwise be conveyed implicitly. Language, in this context, becomes hyper-aware of its own role as a connector, constantly reaffirming the existence of the communicative bond it sustains.

Yet this transformation also reveals a deeper shift in the nature of communication itself. When every element of interaction is oriented toward maintaining contact, the distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful speech begins to blur. The conversation persists not because it conveys information but because it successfully avoids interruption. The medium encourages a form of linguistic minimalism in which the smallest possible utterance suffices to keep the exchange alive. What matters is not what is said but that something continues to be said, that the silence which would signify disconnection is indefinitely postponed. In this sense, instant

messaging amplifies the logic already present in phatic communion: communication becomes an end in itself, a self-sustaining process detached from the necessity of content. The implications of this shift extend beyond the digital environment. The proliferation of such interactions suggests a broader transformation in which language increasingly functions as a system of maintenance rather than transmission. The continuous exchange of minimal signals creates the impression of constant connectivity, yet this connectivity is built upon utterances that carry little semantic weight. The result is a communicative landscape saturated with signs of presence but impoverished in substance. Language circulates endlessly, sustaining the illusion of interaction while gradually detaching from the task of articulating meaning. In this perspective, the phatic function is no longer a marginal aspect of communication but its dominant mode.

It reveals a tendency toward the expansion of language at the expense of its depth, toward a condition in which speech persists even as its capacity to convey significance diminishes. Instant messaging does not merely reflect this tendency; it accelerates it, providing a technological environment in which the maintenance of contact becomes both effortless and obligatory. The constant availability of the channel demands constant affirmation, and the simplest way to meet this demand is through the production of ever more minimal utterances. What appears as a convenience thus conceals a structural transformation: language becomes a continuous background activity, a stream of signals that sustain social bonds while quietly eroding the distinction between speaking and saying. The phatic function, once a supplementary feature of communication, emerges as its defining principle, revealing a world in which the persistence of contact takes precedence over the pursuit of meaning, and where the act of communication survives precisely by becoming increasingly indifferent to what is communicated.

Kulkarni, D. (2013) Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions. Discourse & Communication.

The Comfort of Noise: Speaking to Escape Silence

In Gunter Senft's exposition Phatic Communion from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, building on the foundational work of Bronisław Malinowski and later developments by Roman Jakobson, language emerges not as a system of representation but as a vital form of social action, a means by which human beings defend themselves against the unsettling presence of silence. Malinowski's ethnographic investigations among the Trobriand Islanders led him to a radical rethinking of linguistic meaning, one that relocated significance from abstract semantic content to the pragmatic function of utterance within a lived situation. Speech, in this perspective, cannot be detached from the circumstances of its use, nor from the actions it performs. It is not a mirror of thought but an instrument of engagement, a tool for participating in the fabric of social life. Within this framework, phatic communion appears as a primordial form of linguistic behavior, consisting of those seemingly trivial exchanges—greetings, remarks about health, comments on the weather—that do not aim to inform or persuade but to establish a bond between speaker and listener.

These utterances, often dismissed as empty or superficial, acquire a new significance when understood as the first act in the creation of social connection. The breaking of silence, Malinowski observed, is not merely a prelude to communication but its essential beginning, a gesture that transforms the presence of another from a source of anxiety into a partner in interaction. Silence, in this light, is not neutral but threatening, a sign of disconnection that must be overcome through the ritual of speech. The words exchanged in phatic communion are less important than the fact of

their exchange, the mutual acknowledgment they embody. They function as a linguistic handshake, a minimal yet indispensable affirmation of shared existence. Jakobson's later adaptation of this idea into the concept of the phatic function extends its reach, integrating it into a broader model of communication in which the maintenance of the channel becomes a distinct and necessary function. Yet the shift from communion to communication subtly alters the emphasis, moving from the relational depth of social bonding to the technical condition of contact. This transformation has not gone unchallenged, as scholars such as Adam Kendon have argued for the preservation of Malinowski's original term, which captures more fully the affective and interpersonal dimensions of these exchanges. The subsequent reevaluation of phatic communion reveals both its enduring relevance and its limitations. Critics such as Dell Hymes have questioned its universality, pointing to cultural contexts in which silence is not perceived as threatening but as appropriate or even desirable. Among certain communities, speech is reserved for necessity, and the absence of constant verbal interaction does not signal a breakdown of social bonds. This variation suggests that while the need for connection may be universal, the means by which it is achieved are culturally contingent. Similarly, observations by David Crystal highlight the diversity of topics and forms that phatic expressions can take, demonstrating that what appears trivial in one context may carry significant social meaning in another. The example of greetings among the Trobriand Islanders further complicates the picture, showing that phatic utterances can simultaneously perform social and informational functions. A question about one's destination may establish contact while also conveying practical knowledge, blurring the boundary between empty and meaningful speech.

This duality challenges the notion that phatic communication is devoid of semantic content, suggesting instead that its apparent emptiness is a matter of perspective, dependent on the analytical framework applied. Later developments in the study of phatic communion, particularly in the work of John Laver, expand the concept beyond its initial formulation, emphasizing its role in the management of interpersonal relations. Greetings, farewells, apologies, and small talk are not merely routine exchanges but complex strategies for negotiating social identity, hierarchy, and emotional comfort. They mark the transitions between states of interaction, guiding participants into and out of communicative engagement. In this sense, phatic communion operates at the thresholds of social life, regulating the boundaries between presence and absence, intimacy and distance. The observations of Florian Coulmas further underscore the cultural specificity of these practices, revealing how even the most formulaic expressions can encode deeply rooted values and social structures. What appears as a simple apology or greeting may, in fact, reflect an intricate system of expectations and obligations, a microcosm of the culture in which it is embedded. The enduring significance of Malinowski's insight lies in its capacity to reveal language as a form of action that binds individuals together, not through the transmission of information but through the creation of shared participation. Yet this insight also opens the door to a more unsettling interpretation. If language functions effectively in the absence of informational content, then its role as a medium of meaning becomes secondary to its role as a mechanism of social maintenance. The proliferation of phatic expressions suggests a tendency toward the expansion of speech at the expense of substance, a condition in which communication persists even as its semantic density diminishes. In such a landscape, the primary function of language is no longer to articulate ideas but to prevent the emergence of silence. The constant production of minimal utterances, whether in face-to-face interaction or in digital environments, creates a continuous background of linguistic activity that sustains the illusion of connection. Yet this very continuity may conceal a deeper emptiness, as the repetition of phatic forms gradually detaches language from the task of conveying meaning. The social bond is maintained, but the content that once gave it depth becomes increasingly dispensable.

What emerges is a paradoxical situation in which language thrives by becoming redundant, by multiplying forms that fulfill their function precisely because they do not need to say anything new. In this sense, phatic communion can be seen as both the foundation and the limit of communication, the point at which language reveals its dual nature as both a creator of connection and a potential agent of its own obsolescence. The more language is used to sustain social ties through ritualized exchange, the less it is required to carry the weight of thought. Communication becomes a self-perpetuating process, a cycle of signals that maintain contact while gradually eroding the distinction between meaningful and meaningless speech. The insight that began as an ethnographic observation thus acquires a broader theoretical significance, pointing toward a condition in which the very success of language as a social tool leads to its transformation into a system of continuous yet increasingly empty interaction, where the fear of silence ensures that words never cease, even as their necessity fades.

Malinowski, B. (1936) The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages.

The Economy of Emptiness: Phatic Posts and the Circulation of Presence

In Danica Radovanovic and Massimo Ragnedda's study Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts, the transformation of everyday communication within social networking environments is revealed as a radical expansion of the phatic dimension of language, where the smallest possible utterance becomes sufficient to sustain the illusion of continuous social existence. The authors situate their analysis within the theoretical lineage of Bronisław Malinowski and Roman Jakobson, yet the digital context they explore introduces a new scale and intensity to these earlier insights. What was once an occasional feature of speech, a supplementary layer accompanying meaningful exchange, now emerges as the dominant mode of interaction. The micropost, in its brevity and apparent triviality, does not represent a diminished form of communication but rather its distilled essence, stripped of informational burden and reduced to the minimal act required to signal presence. These phatic posts, as the authors designate them, operate as tokens of recognition, small linguistic gestures that confirm the existence of a social bond without demanding its articulation. They do not inform, persuade, or describe; they acknowledge, maintain, and anticipate. The act of posting, liking, or commenting becomes a ritualized affirmation that one is still within the network, still visible to others, still participating in the shared space of digital life.

This shift reconfigures the very notion of communication, replacing the transmission of content with the circulation of presence. The origins of this phenomenon, as the authors demonstrate, lie in Malinowski's understanding of language as a form of social action, where the context of situation determines meaning more profoundly than the semantic properties of words themselves. Phatic communion, in this sense, is not an aberration but a foundational aspect of linguistic behavior, one that becomes increasingly visible as communication technologies evolve. Jakobson's articulation of the phatic function further clarifies this dynamic, identifying the maintenance of the communicative channel as a distinct and essential task. In the environment of social networking sites, this task becomes continuous and ubiquitous, as users are compelled to reaffirm their connection through a steady stream of minimal interactions. The motivations underlying this behavior reveal a deeper transformation in the structure of social relations. The need for connected presence, as the authors describe it, reflects a condition in which individuals seek not merely to communicate but to remain perceptibly available to one another. The digital environment amplifies the importance of visibility, making the absence of activity equivalent to a form of disappearance. Phatic posts thus serve as signals of existence, markers that one remains

within the field of social perception. At the same time, the creation of intimacy through mundanity illustrates how trivial content can acquire relational significance. A statement about eating chocolate or observing the weather does not convey new knowledge, yet it creates a sense of shared experience, a fleeting alignment between individuals who may be physically distant. This alignment is not based on the depth of the message but on its regularity and accessibility. The avoidance of conflict further shapes the form of phatic communication in digital spaces. Platforms are designed to encourage positive interaction, privileging expressions of approval and minimizing opportunities for disagreement. The absence of mechanisms for negative feedback reinforces a communicative environment in which affirmation becomes the default mode. Phatic posts, in this context, function as instruments of harmony, smoothing over potential tensions by replacing substantive engagement with neutral or positive signals. The dynamics of these interactions reveal a complex system of linguistic strategies adapted to the affordances of technology. Approval signals, such as emojis or brief affirmations, replicate the non-verbal cues of face-to-face interaction, translating nods and smiles into textual form. Mundane updates serve as declarations of presence, indicating that the user is active and available. Coded messages introduce a layer of exclusivity, allowing specific groups to communicate within a shared symbolic framework that remains opaque to outsiders.

Indicators of online presence, whether through status updates or check-ins, function as continuous reminders of one's position within the network. Together, these forms constitute a language of minimal effort and maximal reach, a system in which the cost of communication is reduced to the smallest possible unit while its frequency increases exponentially. The role of technology in facilitating this transformation cannot be overstated. Social networking platforms are structured to prioritize speed, ease, and repetition, enabling users to engage in phatic communication with minimal cognitive investment. The design of these systems encourages a constant flow of interaction, ensuring that the channel remains perpetually open. Yet this very efficiency introduces a paradox. As communication becomes easier, it also becomes more redundant, as the same minimal gestures are repeated across countless interactions. The implications of this shift extend beyond the mechanics of digital communication to the broader condition of language itself. When the primary function of communication is to maintain connection rather than convey meaning, the distinction between significant and insignificant utterances begins to collapse. The proliferation of phatic posts creates a communicative environment saturated with signals that affirm presence but offer little substance. Language becomes a medium of continuous affirmation, a stream of acknowledgments that sustain the network without enriching it. In this environment, the value of an utterance is measured not by its content but by its capacity to generate further interaction. The success of communication lies in its ability to perpetuate itself, to produce responses that in turn produce further responses, creating a self-sustaining cycle of exchange. This cycle, however, risks detaching language from its traditional role as a carrier of thought. The more communication is oriented toward maintaining contact, the less it is required to articulate ideas. The result is a form of linguistic inflation, in which the quantity of communication increases while its semantic density decreases. Words multiply, but meaning does not expand in proportion. Instead, language begins to function as a background system of signals, a continuous hum that supports social interaction without necessarily contributing to understanding. In this sense, phatic posts represent not merely a new genre of communication but a symptom of a broader transformation, one in which the expansion of communicative capacity leads to the dilution of communicative substance. The digital age does not abolish language; it reconfigures it into a system where presence is paramount and meaning is secondary.

The constant exchange of minimal utterances ensures that the network remains active, that the bonds between individuals are continually reaffirmed. Yet this very success raises a critical question: what remains of language when its primary function is no longer to say something, but simply to keep saying? The answer lies in the recognition that communication, once anchored in the transmission of meaning, is increasingly defined by its capacity to sustain itself. Phatic posts, in their simplicity and ubiquity, reveal a condition in which language persists not because it conveys necessity, but because it has become the indispensable mechanism through which social existence is continuously performed and maintained, even as the content of that existence becomes progressively thinner, more repetitive, and ultimately more expendable.

Radovanovic, D. and Ragnedda, M. (2012) Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts.

Meaning Before Meaning: Language as Action in the Birth of Speech

In Bronisław Malinowski's supplementary essay The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages, written in dialogue with C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards' The Meaning of Meaning, language is stripped of its philosophical abstraction and returned to the immediacy of human life, where it functions not as a mirror of thought but as a tool embedded in action, necessity, and social existence. Malinowski challenges the long-standing tradition that treats words as carriers of fixed meanings, proposing instead that meaning arises only within the living context in which language is used. This shift transforms the study of language from a purely analytical endeavor into an ethnographic and pragmatic investigation, where the conditions of speech—its timing, its purpose, its cultural environment—become inseparable from its significance. The call for a science of symbolism reflects this transformation, emphasizing the inadequacy of approaches that isolate language from the lived realities of its speakers. For Malinowski, the ethnographer cannot rely on dictionaries or grammatical abstractions but must immerse themselves in the situational contexts that give words their force and function. The concept of the context of situation becomes the cornerstone of this approach, asserting that no utterance can be understood outside the network of activities, relationships, and cultural expectations in which it occurs.

Spoken language, unlike its written counterpart, is inseparable from the moment of its use, bound to the gestures, intentions, and shared understandings that accompany it. Within this framework, language reveals itself as a mode of action rather than reflection. It coordinates tasks, expresses emotions, and sustains social bonds, operating as an instrument through which individuals engage with their environment and with one another. Meaning, therefore, is not an inherent property of words but an emergent feature of their use in specific situations. This perspective redefines the nature of linguistic meaning, locating it in practice rather than in abstraction. Words become tools, shaped by the needs and activities of the community, their significance determined by the roles they play in the ongoing processes of life. The acquisition of language in early childhood exemplifies this principle, as children learn words not through definitions but through participation in contexts where those words are used. They grasp meaning through action, through repeated engagement with the situations in which language operates. The challenges of translation further illustrate the depth of this contextual dependence. When attempting to render the expressions of one culture into the terms of another, the translator confronts the absence of direct equivalence, the impossibility of capturing meanings that are rooted in specific practices and experiences. To translate a word is not merely to find its lexical counterpart but to reconstruct the context that gives it life. Without this reconstruction, the translation remains incomplete, a shadow of the original utterance. Malinowski's discussion of the so-called magical attitude toward words reveals another

dimension of this pragmatic understanding. In many societies, words are perceived as possessing intrinsic power, capable of influencing reality. This belief, often dismissed as superstition, reflects a deeper recognition of the intimate connection between language and action. When words are used to coordinate activities or express intentions, their effects are tangible and immediate, reinforcing the perception that speech itself can alter the world. This perception persists in various forms, even in modern contexts, where language continues to shape social realities despite claims of its neutrality. The structure of language itself, according to Malinowski, emerges from these practical engagements with the world. Grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs are not arbitrary constructs but reflections of fundamental distinctions in human experience, such as the difference between objects and actions.

In so-called primitive languages, these distinctions often appear fluid, with boundaries between grammatical and lexical functions remaining less rigid than in more standardized linguistic systems. This fluidity underscores the adaptive nature of language, its capacity to evolve in response to the needs of its users. The evolution of meaning follows a similar trajectory, originating in direct interaction with the environment and gradually expanding into more abstract forms. Metaphor, generalization, and grammatical convention arise from the extension of these initial pragmatic functions, demonstrating how complex linguistic structures can emerge from simple, action-oriented beginnings. Malinowski's alignment with the theories of Ogden and Richards further reinforces this perspective, highlighting the interplay between symbolic representation and practical use. Their work provides a framework for understanding how meaning operates across different contexts, bridging the gap between psychological processes and cultural practices. Yet Malinowski's contribution lies in grounding these insights in the empirical realities of ethnographic observation, demonstrating that the study of language must account for the full complexity of human life. From this vantage point, language appears not as a stable system of signs but as a dynamic process, continually shaped by the activities and interactions of its speakers. Meaning is not something that words possess but something they do, a function of their role within the ongoing flow of social existence. This understanding carries profound implications. If meaning arises from context and action, then it is inherently unstable, subject to the shifting conditions of use. The more language is abstracted from these conditions, the more it risks losing its grounding, becoming detached from the practices that sustain it. In this sense, the development of complex linguistic systems, with their emphasis on standardization and generalization, introduces a tension between the immediacy of action and the distance of representation. As language expands, it acquires the capacity to operate independently of specific contexts, enabling the articulation of abstract thought. Yet this expansion also opens the possibility of disconnection, of words that circulate without a clear link to the situations that once gave them meaning. The original unity of language and action begins to fragment, replaced by a system in which meaning must be continually negotiated and re-established. What Malinowski reveals, perhaps unintentionally, is the fragile foundation upon which linguistic meaning rests.

The pragmatic origins of language suggest that its vitality depends on its integration with lived experience, on its capacity to remain anchored in the contexts that generate it. When this integration weakens, language does not disappear but transforms, becoming increasingly self-referential, sustained by its own internal dynamics rather than by its connection to action. The study of primitive languages thus offers not only a window into the origins of meaning but also a lens through which to examine its transformation. It shows that language begins as a tool for doing, for acting within the world, and that its later development into a system of representation carries both the potential for greater expression and the risk of detachment. In this tension between action and abstraction, between context and autonomy, the trajectory of language unfolds, revealing a

process in which the very mechanisms that enable communication also contain the seeds of its eventual instability, as meaning becomes increasingly dependent on a system that no longer guarantees its own grounding in the realities from which it first emerged.

Malinowski, B. (1923) The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages, in Ogden, C.K. and Richards, I.A. (eds.) The Meaning of Meaning. London: Routledge.

The Thoughtless Thought: Cognition at the Edge of Empty Speech

In Vlad Žegarac and Billy Clark's article Phatic Interpretations and Phatic Communication, the phenomenon of phatic exchange is reinterpreted through the framework of Relevance Theory, shifting its center of gravity from the purely social domain into the realm of cognition, where meaning is no longer anchored in words but in the recognition of communicative intention. This approach destabilizes the conventional understanding of phatic communication as trivial or secondary, revealing instead that even the most seemingly empty utterances engage complex inferential processes. The utterance does not need to carry substantial semantic content to be meaningful; it only needs to signal that an intention to communicate exists. From this perspective, the significance of speech lies not in what is said but in the fact that something is being meant, even if that meaning cannot be reduced to propositional content. The authors introduce a refined conceptual apparatus to capture this subtlety, distinguishing between phatic implication, phatic implicature, phatic interpretation, and phatic utterance. Each of these categories marks a step away from the traditional focus on linguistic form and toward an emphasis on the interpretative activity of the hearer.

A phatic implication arises not from the explicit content of an utterance but from the act of communication itself, from the recognition that the speaker has chosen to speak. When this implication is made manifest, it becomes a phatic implicature, guiding the hearer toward an interpretation in which the communicative intention takes precedence over the literal meaning. A phatic interpretation, then, is one in which these implicatures dominate, shaping the understanding of the utterance as primarily relational rather than informational. The notion of phatic communication follows naturally from this framework, describing exchanges designed to elicit such interpretations, where the success of communication is measured not by the transmission of knowledge but by the establishment of mutual recognition. This redefinition introduces the idea that phaticness is not an absolute category but a matter of degree. An utterance may be entirely phatic, as in the ritualized greeting that expects no genuine answer, or it may combine phatic and non-phatic elements, blending relational and informational functions. The spectrum of phaticness reflects the fluidity of everyday communication, where the boundaries between saying something and merely maintaining contact are rarely clear-cut. Context plays a decisive role in determining where on this spectrum a particular utterance falls. In situations of social tension or uncertainty, the mere act of speaking may carry greater weight than the content of the speech, transforming even a banal remark into a significant gesture of engagement. Conversely, in stable and familiar contexts, the same remark may pass unnoticed as part of the background noise of interaction. The examples drawn from cinematic dialogue illustrate how phatic interpretations operate in practice, revealing that much of what appears to be meaningful conversation is, in fact, sustained by the implicit recognition of communicative intent rather than by explicit content. Weather talk, casual greetings, and formulaic exchanges function as signals that interaction is taking place, that the participants remain connected within a shared communicative space. The extension of the analysis to non-ostensive and covert forms of communication further complicates the picture, showing that phatic effects can arise even when communicative intentions are not openly displayed. In such

cases, the interpretation of an utterance depends on subtle cues and contextual knowledge, highlighting the intricate interplay between what is said, what is meant, and what is inferred.

The predictive power of Relevance Theory lies in its ability to account for these phenomena by emphasizing the balance between cognitive effort and interpretative reward. Phatic utterances, by relying on familiar and easily processed forms, minimize the effort required for comprehension while still achieving their primary goal of maintaining contact. When more substantive interpretations fail to yield sufficient relevance, the hearer defaults to a phatic interpretation, recognizing that the purpose of the utterance lies not in its content but in its function as a signal of engagement. This mechanism reveals that phatic communication is not a deviation from the principles of efficient communication but an adaptation to situations where the maintenance of interaction takes precedence over the transmission of information. Yet this cognitive reconfiguration also exposes a deeper transformation in the nature of language. If the primary meaning of an utterance can reside in the recognition of intention rather than in the content itself, then language begins to operate at a level where the distinction between meaning and non-meaning becomes increasingly blurred. The utterance becomes a trigger for interpretation rather than a container of information, a prompt that activates inferential processes without necessarily providing material to be interpreted. In this sense, phatic communication represents a limit case of linguistic function, where the act of communication is sustained by the minimal recognition that communication is occurring. The implications of this shift extend beyond the specific domain of phatic exchange. They suggest that language, in its most pervasive forms, may be moving toward a condition in which the cognitive recognition of communicative intent replaces the need for substantive content. The more communication relies on phatic interpretations, the less it depends on the articulation of ideas. Interaction persists, but its substance becomes increasingly secondary, subordinated to the maintenance of the communicative process itself. This tendency is particularly visible in environments where rapid, low-effort exchanges dominate, creating a continuous flow of utterances that sustain engagement without requiring depth. The result is a form of communication that is cognitively efficient yet semantically thin, capable of maintaining social bonds while gradually reducing the role of language as a medium of thought. What Žegarac and Clark reveal, perhaps inadvertently, is the emergence of a linguistic condition in which meaning is no longer located in the words themselves but in the recognition of their use. Language becomes a system of signals that indicate the presence of intention, a network of cues that sustain interaction through minimal cognitive investment. In such a system, the success of communication is measured not by the clarity or richness of meaning but by the continuity of contact.

The channel remains open, the exchange continues, and the participants remain engaged, even as the content of their interaction becomes increasingly interchangeable. This transformation suggests that the evolution of communication may not lead toward greater precision or expressiveness but toward greater efficiency in maintaining connection. The price of this efficiency, however, is the gradual erosion of the distinction between speaking and saying, between the act of communication and the content communicated. Phatic communication, in its cognitive redefinition, thus reveals a paradox at the heart of language: the very mechanisms that allow communication to persist in the absence of content also point toward a condition in which content itself becomes optional, as the recognition of communicative intention suffices to sustain the entire structure of interaction.

Žegarac, V. and Clark, B. (1999) Phatic Interpretations and Phatic Communication. Journal of Linguistics.

Architecture of Attention: Building Communities from Signals of Presence

In the thesis Phatics and the Design of Community, centered on the communicative dynamics of Twitter and situated within Human-Computer Interaction research, phatic communication is reimagined not merely as a linguistic curiosity but as a foundational principle for designing social environments in which connection precedes content and presence becomes the primary currency of interaction. The study approaches microblogging platforms as laboratories of minimal communication, where the smallest possible signals—brief updates, fragments of thought, passing acknowledgments—accumulate into a continuous field of awareness that binds individuals into a perceptible collective. Within this environment, communication is no longer evaluated by the depth of information exchanged but by its capacity to sustain a shared sense of co-existence. The platform does not require elaboration; it thrives on repetition, frequency, and immediacy, transforming language into a system of lightweight gestures that maintain social bonds through their very persistence. This reconfiguration aligns with the phatic function as identified by Roman Jakobson, yet it extends the concept beyond the confines of speech into the domain of technological design, where interfaces themselves become instruments of relational maintenance. The introduction of Twitter as a case study reveals how digital infrastructures can amplify the subtle mechanics of phatic exchange.

By enabling rapid, low-effort interactions, the platform supports a form of communication that mirrors casual, everyday encounters while operating on a vastly expanded scale. The notion of ambient intimacy captures this condition, describing a mode of awareness in which individuals remain loosely connected through a continuous flow of minimal updates. These updates do not demand attention; they offer it as a possibility, creating a background presence that can be engaged or ignored without disrupting the overall continuity of connection. In this sense, the platform does not simply host communication; it generates a specific form of sociality, one in which the maintenance of weak ties becomes not only possible but effortless. The historical shift in the valuation of weak ties underscores the significance of this transformation. Once considered peripheral to meaningful interaction, these connections are now recognized as crucial for expanding networks and facilitating the circulation of information and opportunity. Phatic communication provides the mechanism through which such ties are sustained, allowing individuals to remain within each other's perceptual horizon without the need for sustained engagement. The design of systems that support this form of interaction thus becomes a central concern for Human-Computer Interaction, as it directly influences the structure and quality of social networks. Public displays of phatic exchanges, such as those implemented in shared physical spaces, further illustrate the potential of these mechanisms to shape collective experience. By visualizing the continuous stream of micro-interactions, such installations create a digital commons, a space in which the dispersed activities of individuals coalesce into a visible pattern of communal life. The effect is not to deepen individual interactions but to broaden awareness, to make the presence of others perceptible even in their absence. This expansion of awareness operates as a form of social glue, fostering a sense of belonging that arises not from direct engagement but from the recognition of shared participation in a common communicative field. The exploration of phatic communication within this context reveals its dual nature.

On one hand, it is often dismissed as trivial, as noise that clutters the channels of communication without contributing meaningful content. On the other hand, it performs essential ceremonial functions, marking the boundaries of interaction and signaling the willingness to engage. The incorporation of phatic principles into the design of technological systems acknowledges this duality, leveraging the apparent simplicity of these exchanges to create environments that encourage participation and reduce barriers to interaction. Devices such as The Cube and

SynchroMate exemplify this approach, translating phatic signals into visual and tactile forms that complement traditional modes of communication. These technologies do not replace speech but augment it, providing additional channels through which connection can be maintained with minimal effort. The analysis of Twitterspaces and personal information streams extends this perspective, demonstrating how the aggregation and visualization of phatic exchanges can reveal the underlying dynamics of social interaction. The metaphor of the stream captures the fluidity of these exchanges, their continuous movement and constant renewal. Each individual contributes to the flow, and in doing so becomes part of a larger pattern that reflects the collective activity of the network. The visualization of this pattern transforms the abstract notion of community into a tangible experience, making visible the otherwise invisible threads that connect individuals across time and space. This visibility, however, does not necessarily translate into deeper engagement. The increase in activity observed in such environments indicates a heightened level of participation, yet the nature of that participation remains consistent with the phatic logic of minimal interaction. The system encourages users to contribute signals of presence, to maintain their position within the network, rather than to engage in sustained dialogue. The contribution of this research to Human-Computer Interaction lies in its recognition of the centrality of phatic communication in shaping user experience. By designing systems that accommodate the human need for connection and the cyclical nature of engagement and disengagement, it becomes possible to create interfaces that are more responsive to the realities of social behavior. The integration of relational-cultural theory into this framework further emphasizes the importance of understanding communication as a process of ongoing negotiation, where connection is continually established, maintained, and reconfigured. Yet this design-oriented perspective also reveals a deeper transformation in the nature of communication itself. When systems are optimized for the production and circulation of phatic signals, language begins to operate as an infrastructure rather than as a medium of thought. The value of an utterance is measured by its ability to sustain the network, to contribute to the continuous flow of interaction, rather than by the ideas it conveys. Communication becomes ambient, a constant background process that supports social awareness without demanding cognitive engagement.

The proliferation of such systems suggests a shift toward a condition in which the maintenance of connection becomes an end in itself, independent of the content that once justified communication. In this condition, the distinction between meaningful and meaningless interaction becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The accumulation of minimal signals creates a dense network of connections, yet the depth of those connections remains uncertain. Language persists as a mechanism of social cohesion, but its role as a vehicle of meaning is gradually overshadowed by its function as a carrier of presence. What emerges is a communicative environment in which individuals are continuously connected yet only intermittently engaged, where the architecture of interaction is built from the repetition of signals that affirm existence without necessarily articulating it. The design of community, in this sense, becomes the design of a system that can sustain this delicate balance, maintaining the flow of phatic communication while navigating the tension between connection and content, between the necessity of presence and the diminishing necessity of meaning.

Radovanovic, D. and Ragnedda, M. (2012) Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts.

The Ethics of Empty Contact: Professional Speech as Engineered Goodwill

In the article Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical Eunoia to Personal Artificial Intelligence, the evolution of professional discourse is reframed through the lens of phatic communication, revealing a profound transformation in which the primary task of communication is no longer the transmission of information but the cultivation of relational continuity, trust, and cooperative alignment across increasingly mediated environments. The text situates this transformation within a historical arc that stretches from the anthropological insights of Bronisław Malinowski to the rhetorical traditions of antiquity, where the concept of goodwill—eunoia—emerges as a central pillar of persuasive and ethical interaction. What appears at first as a marginal function of language, relegated to the domain of politeness or conversational filler, is here elevated to a foundational principle that structures the very possibility of professional communication in the digital age.

The contemporary communicator is no longer defined primarily as a producer of content but as a designer of interaction, a curator of relational spaces in which communication unfolds as a continuous process of connection rather than a discrete exchange of messages. This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of linguistic priorities, where the maintenance of communicative channels assumes precedence over the articulation of substantive ideas. The invocation of classical rhetoric underscores the depth of this transformation. Aristotle's notion of ethos, with its emphasis on the character and credibility of the speaker, and Cicero's elaboration of captatio benevolentiae, the strategic cultivation of goodwill at the outset of discourse, reveal that the phatic dimension of communication has long been recognized as essential, even if it has often been overshadowed by the more visible functions of informing and persuading. In this context, phatic communication is not an addition to rhetorical practice but its underlying condition, the precondition that enables any exchange to occur within a framework of mutual recognition and trust. The digital environment, however, amplifies this dimension to an unprecedented degree. As communication becomes increasingly mediated by technological systems, the need to establish and sustain relational bonds through minimal signals intensifies. Email, virtual collaboration platforms, user forums, and artificial intelligence interfaces all depend on the continuous affirmation of presence and attentiveness, often through forms of interaction that carry little explicit content. The analysis of email and online small talk reveals how the absence of phatic elements can render communication cold, abrupt, or even hostile, despite the clarity of the information conveyed. The inclusion of brief, seemingly trivial exchanges serves to humanize the interaction, to signal respect and openness, and to create a space in which cooperation can emerge. In intercultural contexts, this function becomes even more critical, as variations in communicative norms require heightened sensitivity to the relational dimensions of language.

What counts as appropriate phatic engagement in one culture may appear excessive or insufficient in another, making the management of these signals a complex and delicate task. Virtual teamwork further illustrates the centrality of phatic communication in contemporary professional settings. In geographically dispersed groups, where physical co-presence is absent, the maintenance of trust depends on the regular exchange of signals that affirm commitment and availability. These signals may take the form of brief updates, acknowledgments, or expressions of support, none of which contribute directly to the completion of tasks yet all of which are essential for sustaining the collaborative process. Leadership within such environments involves not only the coordination of activities but the orchestration of these phatic exchanges, ensuring that the communicative fabric of the team remains intact. User help forums extend this logic into the domain of customer interaction, where the role of the communicator shifts from providing solutions to facilitating engagement. The effectiveness of these spaces depends less on the accuracy of the information

provided than on the quality of the interaction, on the ability to create an वातावरण in which users feel recognized and supported. Phatic communication becomes the medium through which this environment is constructed, enabling a form of collective problem-solving that relies on relational bonds as much as on technical knowledge. The emergence of phatic bots represents the most striking manifestation of this transformation. Artificial intelligence systems designed to simulate human interaction operate primarily through the generation of phatic signals, producing responses that convey attentiveness, empathy, and engagement without necessarily advancing the informational content of the exchange. These systems exemplify the possibility of separating the function of communication from its substance, demonstrating that the appearance of relational presence can be maintained even in the absence of genuine understanding. The ethical implications of this development are significant, as it raises questions about the authenticity of interaction and the potential for manipulation within environments where the boundaries between human and artificial communication are increasingly blurred. Cultural variations in phatic communication further complicate this landscape, revealing that the forms and expectations of relational exchange are deeply embedded in specific traditions and practices.

The Japanese practice of aizuchi, with its emphasis on continuous verbal and non-verbal feedback, contrasts with contexts in which silence is valued as a sign of respect or reflection. Social media platforms introduce their own conventions, where features such as likes and brief comments function as standardized phatic signals, enabling users to maintain a sense of connected presence with minimal effort. These variations demonstrate that while the need for phatic communication may be universal, its expression is highly contingent, shaped by the interplay of cultural norms and technological affordances. The broader implication of this analysis lies in the recognition that professional communication has undergone a fundamental reorientation. The traditional hierarchy of communicative purposes, in which informing and persuading occupy the highest positions, is supplanted by a model in which the maintenance of connection becomes primary. This reorientation reflects not only the demands of digital interaction but a deeper shift in the nature of language itself. As communication becomes increasingly oriented toward the management of relationships, the distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful speech begins to dissolve. The proliferation of phatic exchanges creates a communicative environment in which the continuity of interaction is valued over the depth of content, where the success of communication is measured by its ability to sustain engagement rather than to convey ideas. In this environment, language functions as an infrastructure of connection, a system of signals that ensures the persistence of social bonds even as the substance of those bonds becomes increasingly attenuated. The concept of eunoia, once a rhetorical ideal, is thus transformed into a design principle, embedded in the architecture of communication systems and the algorithms that govern them. Goodwill is no longer merely cultivated; it is engineered, produced through the systematic deployment of phatic signals that create the appearance of care and attentiveness. This transformation reveals both the power and the limitation of phatic communication. It demonstrates the capacity of language to sustain social relations through minimal means, to create a sense of community and cooperation even in the absence of substantial content.

At the same time, it exposes the risk that communication may become self-sustaining, detached from the articulation of thought, and oriented primarily toward its own continuation. The professional communicator, in this context, becomes a manager of this tension, navigating the delicate balance between connection and content, between the necessity of maintaining relationships and the equally pressing need to preserve the meaningfulness of communication itself. The expansion of the phatic function into the core of professional practice thus marks a critical moment in the evolution of language, one in which the very success of communication as

a tool for connection threatens to redefine its purpose, transforming it into a continuous process of relational maintenance that persists even as the substance it once carried becomes increasingly optional.

Malinowski, B. (1923) The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages.

Between Contact and Communion: The Double Life of Phaticity

In Charles H.P. Zuckerman's entry Phatic, the: Communication and Communion, the concept of the phatic is disentangled into two competing yet inseparable trajectories—communion phaticity and contact phaticity—revealing that what has often been treated as a single phenomenon is in fact a conceptual knot binding together distinct understandings of what it means to be in communication. At its origin in Bronisław Malinowski's formulation of phatic communion, language appears as a social act oriented toward the creation of bonds, a mode of speech that exists not to convey information but to produce a sense of fellowship. This communion-based perspective situates phaticity within the domain of sociability, where casual exchanges, routine greetings, and conversational fillers function as rituals of belonging. Yet even here, the apparent simplicity of phatic talk conceals a theoretical instability. The assumption that such speech is non-informative rests on a narrow conception of information, one that privileges denotation while overlooking the dense network of social, contextual, and pragmatic meanings embedded in these exchanges. As a result, communion phaticity risks becoming a residual category, a conceptual container for anything that appears redundant or semantically thin.

The ease with which analysts label an utterance as merely phatic reflects not the clarity of the concept but its vagueness, its susceptibility to absorbing phenomena that resist more precise classification. Zuckerman's analysis exposes this tendency, showing how studies of phatic communion often obscure the referential dimensions of the very examples they use, as if speakers were engaged in a kind of linguistic humming, producing sound without substance. Against this backdrop, the introduction of contact phaticity by Roman Jakobson marks a decisive shift. Here, the focus moves from the formation of social bonds to the technical and psychological conditions that make communication possible. The phatic function, in Jakobson's formulation, concerns the establishment, maintenance, and testing of the communicative channel itself. It is less about what language does between people and more about how it ensures that communication can occur at all. This reorientation aligns the concept with developments in information theory and cybernetics, where communication is understood as a system requiring the continuous verification of its own operability. The examples associated with this perspective—checking whether one is heard, attracting attention, confirming engagement—highlight a dimension of language that operates at the level of infrastructure rather than content. Communication becomes a circuit, and phatic signs are the signals that keep the circuit active. The distinction between these two forms of phaticity, however, is not merely theoretical. It reflects a deeper tension in the understanding of language itself, between its role as a medium of social relation and its role as a mechanism of connection. Communion phaticity emphasizes the qualitative aspect of interaction, the creation of rapport and shared experience, while contact phaticity foregrounds the quantitative and technical aspects, the management of attention and the maintenance of channels.

The entanglement of these perspectives has led to a persistent confusion, as researchers conflate the existence of contact with the presence of sociability, assuming that the act of communication necessarily produces positive relational outcomes. Zuckerman challenges this assumption by demonstrating that contact is a contingent achievement, one that can take multiple forms and does

not inherently lead to communion. The management of contact involves a wide range of semiotic resources, extending beyond language to include gaze, bodily orientation, and the manipulation of attention. It is not a binary condition but a gradient, varying in intensity and distributed across different modalities. One can be partially present, selectively attentive, or strategically disengaged, navigating a complex hierarchy of involvement. Moreover, contact can be oriented not only toward connection but toward avoidance, disruption, or exclusion. The same mechanisms that enable interaction can be used to ignore, to resist, or to sever ties. This recognition expands the scope of phaticity, revealing it as a pervasive dimension of semiotic activity rather than a specialized linguistic function. The asymmetry of contact further complicates the picture, as individuals may perceive or address others without reciprocal acknowledgment, creating uneven distributions of attention and awareness. These dynamics underscore the fact that contact is not a neutral state but a field of negotiation, shaped by the intentions and actions of participants as well as by the affordances of the medium through which communication occurs. The role of ideology in shaping perceptions of contact introduces an additional layer of complexity. Zuckerman emphasizes that contact is not only managed but interpreted, becoming an object of reflection and a source of meaning in its own right. Across different contexts, the presence or absence of contact can be taken as an index of social relations, emotional states, or moral dispositions. Looking at a phone during a conversation may be perceived as disrespect or as a practical necessity, depending on the situation. Similarly, initiating conversation may signal friendliness or intrusion. These interpretations are not determined by the technical properties of contact but by the semiotic ideologies that individuals bring to their interactions. The inability to separate the management of contact from the meanings attributed to it creates a methodological challenge, as analysts must navigate the interplay between observable behavior and the interpretations that give it significance. The temptation to collapse these dimensions into a single explanatory framework risks obscuring the variability and flexibility of phatic phenomena.

By maintaining a distinction between contact and its ideological elaboration, it becomes possible to recognize the multiplicity of ways in which communication can be understood and experienced. The broader implications of this analysis extend to the contemporary landscape of mediated communication, where the proliferation of technologies has intensified the importance of contact while simultaneously complicating its interpretation. The notion of a phatic media culture, in which the maintenance of connection takes precedence over the production of content, captures a significant aspect of this transformation. Yet Zuckerman's critique cautions against equating the persistence of contact with the existence of sociability, highlighting the need for careful, context-sensitive analysis. The act of keeping in touch does not necessarily produce meaningful relationships; it may simply sustain the appearance of connection. This distinction becomes crucial in understanding the evolving nature of communication, where the capacity to maintain contact is increasingly decoupled from the depth of interaction.

The questions that emerge from this perspective—how a communicative relation becomes a relationship, what it means to engage in contact without content, how silence itself can function as a form of interaction—point toward a redefinition of language as a system that operates simultaneously at the levels of connection and meaning, without guaranteeing the convergence of the two. In this sense, phaticity reveals not a peripheral feature of communication but its fundamental ambiguity, the coexistence of mechanisms that enable contact and practices that invest that contact with significance. The distinction between communion and contact thus becomes not a matter of classification but a lens through which to examine the shifting balance between these dimensions, a balance that increasingly defines the conditions under which communication unfolds, persists, and transforms.

Zuckerman, C.H.P. (2020). Phatic, The: Communication and Communion. The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology, pp.1–5.

Warmth Against Resistance: The Polite Siege of the Closed Self

In the conference paper by Siti Nurmasyitah and Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Politeness Strategies in Phatic Utterances: A Pragmatic Study of Film A Man Called Otto, the apparently modest sphere of everyday greetings, routine remarks, and supportive conversational gestures is revealed as a subtle theatre of emotional negotiation in which language works less to communicate facts than to soften resistance, reduce distance, and slowly draw isolated individuals back into the human circle. The study begins from the premise that speech cannot be understood only as a means of transmitting information, because much of what people say in ordinary life serves another task altogether: it keeps contact alive, protects social balance, and makes coexistence bearable. This is precisely the region of phatic communion, that peculiar area of language where words seem small, repetitive, or even semantically thin, yet where their social force may be decisive. In the world of the film, this force becomes especially visible because the central figure is a man who resists sociality itself. Otto stands as a difficult test case for phatic language. He is withdrawn, abrupt, suspicious of intrusion, and emotionally locked within grief. Around him, however, other characters persist in addressing him through the gentlest and most ordinary verbal means: greetings, thanks, teasing remarks, invitations, apologies, and bits of supportive chat.

The importance of the study lies in showing that such expressions are not decorative additions to social life but small instruments of persistence through which the walls of estrangement are gradually worn down. The analysis draws together phatic communion and politeness theory, and this conjunction is illuminating because both frameworks concern the management of interpersonal distance. Phatic expressions open the channel and keep it from collapsing into silence, while politeness strategies determine how this opening can occur without threatening the fragile self-image of the other. The film becomes a laboratory of this process. Otto often answers with minimal, cold, or resistant utterances, but the people around him continue to approach him in linguistically careful ways. Their speech does not force intimacy directly. Rather, it circles around him, tests the limits of his defensiveness, and creates repeated occasions for low-risk contact. This is why the predominance of supportive chat in the findings is so significant. Supportive chat is not merely chatter. It is speech that cushions interaction, absorbs tension, and offers human recognition without demanding an equal emotional return. In a social world governed by raw directness alone, a figure like Otto would remain sealed off. But through supportive chat, others create an atmosphere in which even hostility can be answered with warmth, and where relation survives despite rebuff. The study identifies four forms of phatic communion: ritual words exchanged when people meet, standard topics of conversation, supportive chat, and meaningless or misunderstood words. These categories reveal that phaticity is not a single type of utterance but a range of linguistic tactics through which sociality is maintained. Ritual greetings and farewells perform the minimal acknowledgment that another person is present and worthy of address. They are the smallest units of social recognition. In the film, these brief formulas matter precisely because Otto often gives little back; yet the neighbors continue to greet him, thank him, and wish him well. Such gestures do not immediately transform him, but they prevent his total exclusion from communal life. They say, in effect, that the relation still exists even if he refuses to nourish it. Standard topics of conversation perform a slightly different function. They allow speakers to approach one another under the cover of neutral subject matter.

Weather, schedules, neighbors, practical situations, and casual observations all belong to this zone. Their value lies not in their informational richness but in their safety. They create a shared verbal surface on which contact can occur without the danger of emotional exposure. In Otto's case, such topics are particularly important because his inner life is inaccessible; neutral conversation becomes the bridge that allows others to remain near him without trespassing too violently upon his solitude. Meaningless or misunderstood words occupy yet another fascinating space. These are the smallest residues of conversational continuity, expressions that might appear empty if judged only by semantic standards but which in practice preserve the rhythm of mutual presence. A brief cool, exactly, okay, or similar response may contribute almost nothing to factual understanding and yet do crucial social work by keeping the interaction from collapsing. Such words are the crumbs by which human contact survives when fuller meaning is unavailable or unwelcome. But it is supportive chat that dominates the study, and rightly so, because supportive chat is the form best suited to a hostile or wounded social environment. Otto's neighbors do not merely exchange routine formulas with him; they actively cushion his roughness through humor, gratitude, teasing, praise, and patient acknowledgment. This is not accidental. Supportive chat functions as a compensatory mechanism in situations where direct emotional communication would fail. It allows one party to continue affirming the possibility of relation even when the other refuses it. The dominance of positive politeness in the findings confirms this logic. Positive politeness seeks closeness, approval, and solidarity. It tells the other person: you are included, you are recognized, you belong within this circle of shared feeling. In the film, the neighbors repeatedly use such strategies not because Otto is easy to like, but because he is difficult. Their speech acts are not reflections of an already existing intimacy; they are attempts to create the conditions under which intimacy might eventually become possible. This is why the film offers more than a simple case study of politeness. It reveals politeness as an ethical practice of persistence. Positive politeness here is not superficial niceness. It is a disciplined refusal to let another person vanish into bitterness. Even humor, especially Marisol's playful teasing, takes on this ethical role. Her joking remarks do not merely entertain.

They rescue the interaction from the gravity of Otto's negativity and keep open a space where affection can survive under the guise of laughter. Negative politeness, though less frequent, plays an equally important role. Apologies and deferential forms acknowledge boundaries and reduce imposition. In dealing with someone as irritable as Otto, such strategies prevent escalation. They allow contact to continue without forcing the issue of intimacy too quickly. The lesser presence of bald on-record and off-record strategies is also revealing. In a socially fragile environment, bluntness risks rupture, while excessive indirectness may fail to establish meaningful contact at all. The preference for positive politeness therefore reflects a balance: enough warmth to reduce distance, enough tact to avoid aggression. What makes the study especially rich is that it does not present phatic language as decorative verbal waste. On the contrary, it shows that these small forms of speech are the very medium through which social repair becomes possible. Otto's transformation is not achieved through grand confessions or philosophical speeches. It begins in repeated ordinary encounters, in the patient accumulation of greetings, invitations, thanks, jokes, and minor acts of verbal care. The banal here is not empty. It is redemptive. This is where the deeper significance of the study emerges. What appears to be the most routine level of language turns out to be the place where human beings negotiate the terms of coexistence. Phatic utterances are often ignored because they seem to say nothing important. Yet they sustain the interpersonal climate in which anything important could eventually be said. They are the social precondition of meaning. Without them, there is only isolation, blunt function, or silence. In this sense, the film demonstrates that social harmony is not maintained by abstract principles alone but by the repeated performance of tiny linguistic recognitions. A greeting can be a bridge. A thank you can be a form

of moral acknowledgment. A playful comment can interrupt despair. A supportive remark can become the first crack in emotional stone. The study therefore points toward a larger truth about language in everyday life: its most decisive work often occurs not when it informs, argues, or explains, but when it reassures one person that another still considers them reachable. From this perspective, the neighbors' speech around Otto becomes almost a collective labor of reclamation. They speak him back into relation. They refuse the finality of his withdrawal. Their politeness is not mere etiquette but a way of insisting that even a difficult, grieving, and resistant person remains part of a shared human world. This has wider implications for understanding the banal dimension of language.

The banal is often condemned as empty repetition, social automation, or the dead residue of convention. But the exchanges analyzed here show another side of banality: its capacity to preserve human continuity where deeper communication is not yet possible. Banality, in its phatic form, is what prevents the world from breaking into pure estrangement. It is the cushion between silence and speech, hostility and familiarity, loneliness and belonging. When language becomes too grand, it often fails; when it becomes small enough, it may finally begin to work. That is why the ordinary phrases in the film matter so much. They do not solve grief, but they outlast it. They do not erase Otto's bitterness, but they erode its monopoly. They do not reveal hidden truths in a dramatic instant, but they create the conditions in which another life can slowly reappear. In that sense, phatic communion and politeness are not peripheral ornaments of communication. They are among its most humane powers, because they keep the social world habitable even for those who have almost ceased to believe in it.

Nurmasyitah, S. and Rahayu, F.E.S. (2024) 'Politeness Strategies in Phatic Utterances: A Pragmatic Study of Film A Man Called Otto', Seminar Nasional Bahasa, Sastra, dan Seni: Narasi Identitas dan Ketahanan Budaya di Era Ibu Kota Negara Nusantara (IKN), pp. 115–128.

Ritualized Rebellion: How Teenagers Turn Disagreement into Social Glue

In the article Phraseology in Teenage Language in Spanish, English and Norwegian: Notes on a Number of Fixed Expressions that Articulate Disagreement by Annette Myre Jørgensen and Inés Olza, the seemingly chaotic, vulgar, and emotionally charged speech of adolescents is revealed as a highly structured and socially meaningful system in which disagreement—far from being a breakdown of communication—becomes one of its most productive and cohesive forces. The study dismantles the assumption that opposition in conversation is inherently disruptive, showing instead that in teenage interaction it often functions as a ritualized practice of belonging, a coded performance through which identity, intimacy, and group solidarity are continuously negotiated. What appears, at first glance, as linguistic aggression—expressions such as no way, like hell, ikke faen, or their Spanish counterparts loaded with bodily and taboo imagery—is in fact a sophisticated communicative strategy embedded in shared norms, expectations, and cultural patterns that transcend individual languages while remaining locally distinct in their expressive richness. The authors approach these expressions not as isolated lexical curiosities but as phraseological units, fixed constructions whose meaning cannot be reduced to their literal components, and whose pragmatic force emerges from their repeated use in real interaction.

This insistence on corpus-based analysis is crucial, because it shifts attention away from abstract linguistic intuition toward the empirical reality of how language is actually used among young speakers, where disagreement is not merely said but enacted, intensified, echoed, and stylized. Within this framework, disagreement is defined broadly as any conversational move that opposes

or rejects a previous statement, yet its significance lies less in its propositional content than in its interactional positioning. These phraseological units operate as responses, reactions, and counter-moves; they are inherently dialogic, always oriented toward what has just been said, and thus deeply embedded in the flow of conversation. This reactive nature gives them a metapragmatic dimension: they do not simply express disagreement, they comment on the very act of speaking, reshaping the meaning of prior discourse through repetition, distortion, or emphatic rejection. The phenomenon of discursive echo is particularly revealing in this respect. By repeating part of the previous utterance—sometimes verbatim, sometimes in exaggerated or ironic form—the speaker highlights the contested element and then overlays it with a phraseological unit that transforms its value. The result is not merely contradiction but a re-framing of the conversational terrain, where the original statement is exposed, mocked, or intensified through the very act of being echoed. This mechanism underscores the theatrical quality of teenage talk: disagreement is not hidden or softened but displayed, stylized, and amplified. Yet this amplification does not necessarily produce conflict. On the contrary, within peer groups it often signals closeness and trust. The study draws on politeness theory to show that what would be considered face-threatening in other contexts may function here as a marker of in-group membership. The absence of mitigation, the use of taboo words, and the intensity of expression are not signs of hostility but of familiarity. Teenagers, as the authors suggest, inhabit a communicative world in which extremes are preferred over moderation, where linguistic hyperbole mirrors a broader tendency to perceive experience in stark contrasts rather than subtle gradations. In this world, saying no is rarely enough; it must be reinforced, dramatized, and embodied in language that carries emotional weight. This is where phraseology becomes central. The fixed expressions analyzed in the article are not arbitrary. They draw on recurring semantic fields—especially the body and the taboo—to encode negativity, rejection, and disbelief. Words related to sexuality, bodily functions, or socially prohibited domains serve as building blocks for expressions that are both highly expressive and culturally recognizable. Despite differences across Spanish, English, and Norwegian, the underlying pattern is strikingly similar: disagreement is constructed through lexemes that already carry negative or transgressive connotations, allowing the phrase as a whole to crystallize its modal meaning without relying on explicit negation. In this sense, phraseology functions as a shortcut to emotional intensity, condensing complex attitudes into compact, repeatable forms. At the same time, these forms are not rigid. The study highlights a remarkable degree of variability and creativity, especially in Spanish, where speakers manipulate established patterns to produce new variations that intensify or personalize the expression of disagreement.

This variability reveals that phraseological units are not static relics but dynamic templates, open to modification while retaining their recognizable structure. Such flexibility allows speakers to balance convention and innovation, ensuring that their speech remains both socially intelligible and individually expressive. The cross-linguistic comparison further enriches this picture by showing that while the specific forms differ, the communicative logic remains consistent. All three languages exhibit phraseological constructions that can function as independent utterances or as parts of larger sentences, that can precede or follow the segment they negate, and that can operate with or without explicit reference to the contested statement. This syntactic and discursive flexibility underscores their role as operators of modality rather than mere lexical items. They do not simply add content to an utterance; they shape its stance, its orientation toward truth, belief, and social alignment. In this way, disagreement becomes not just a matter of saying no, but of positioning oneself within a network of relations, asserting identity while negotiating belonging. The article also situates these findings within a broader understanding of teenage language as a site of linguistic innovation and social experimentation. Adolescents are described as “movers and shakers” of language, not because they invent entirely new systems, but because they reconfigure

existing resources in ways that anticipate future change. The phraseological units studied here exemplify this process. They are not exclusive to teenage speech, yet their use among adolescents reveals new pragmatic nuances and patterns of politeness that may later diffuse into the wider language. This perspective challenges the marginalization of teenage talk in linguistic research, arguing instead that it offers a privileged window into the dynamics of language change, social identity, and communicative creativity.

Ultimately, the study invites a reconsideration of disagreement itself. Rather than viewing it as a failure of communication, it suggests that disagreement can be one of its most vital forms, especially in contexts where social bonds are negotiated through tension as much as through harmony. In teenage interaction, to disagree is not necessarily to oppose; it is to participate, to engage, to signal presence within the group. The phraseological units analyzed here are the linguistic tools that make this participation possible, transforming conflict into a shared practice, a game of echoes and intensifications through which speakers affirm both their individuality and their belonging. What emerges is a vision of language in which even the most abrasive expressions are part of a deeper social choreography, where meaning is not only conveyed but performed, and where the very act of saying no becomes a way of saying we.

Jørgensen, A.M. and Olza, I. (2019) 'Phraseology in teenage language in Spanish, English and Norwegian: Notes on a number of fixed expressions that articulate disagreement', Languages in Contrast.

The Silence That Speaks: Phatic Communication as the Hidden Infrastructure of Social Order

In the article Exploring Phatic Communication Functions among Native and Nonnative English Speakers at Saudi Multilingual Context by Waleed Mahmoud Hamdoun, phatic communication emerges not as a peripheral linguistic ornament, but as the invisible architecture upon which social life is constructed, sustained, and stabilized in multilingual environments. What is at stake in this analysis is not merely the classification of greetings, farewells, or small talk, but the recognition that language operates most powerfully where it appears to say nothing. The study advances a fundamental inversion of common linguistic assumptions: the most socially consequential utterances are often those that carry the least informational weight. These utterances—Hi, How are you?, Peace be upon you, Take care—do not transmit knowledge; they perform recognition, enact presence, and negotiate the fragile continuity of human relations across cultural boundaries. In a workplace where English functions as a lingua franca among speakers from radically different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the absence of such ritualized exchanges would not produce efficiency but rupture. Communication would not become clearer; it would become socially uninhabitable.

At the conceptual core of the study lies the notion of phatic communication as originally articulated by Bronisław Malinowski, who understood language not simply as a tool for conveying meaning but as a medium for establishing social bonds. This insight is extended and empirically grounded in a contemporary multilingual setting, where the coexistence of native and nonnative English speakers produces a dynamic field of interaction governed less by grammatical competence than by pragmatic sensitivity. The study demonstrates that phatic expressions function as social lubricants: they reduce friction, pre-empt misunderstanding, and create a shared communicative space in which participants can operate despite differences in linguistic proficiency or cultural

expectations. The paradox is that these expressions achieve their effect precisely because they are conventional, repetitive, and often semantically empty. Their value lies not in what they mean, but in the fact that they are recognized as appropriate signals within a given interactional frame. The methodological design—combining quantitative questionnaires with qualitative interviews—reflects an attempt to capture both the frequency and the lived experience of these expressions. Yet beyond methodology, what emerges is a pattern of remarkable convergence: native and nonnative speakers, despite their differences, exhibit a high degree of harmony in their use of phatic devices. This convergence is not accidental. It is the result of a shared need to maintain relational equilibrium in a context where misinterpretation is always a latent risk. The study shows, for instance, that native English speakers often adopt Arabic greetings such as السلام عليكم, while nonnative speakers engage with English formulas like How are you? or Have a nice day. This reciprocal accommodation is not merely linguistic; it is symbolic. It signals a willingness to enter the other's cultural space, to acknowledge their norms, and to reduce social distance through linguistic choice. In this sense, phatic communication becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where identities are not fixed but continuously adjusted through interaction.

The functional classification proposed in the study—twelve distinct functions ranging from breaking silence to expressing solidarity—reveals the breadth of phatic communication's role. These functions map the entire lifecycle of interaction: from its initiation, through its maintenance, to its closure. Each phase is governed by ritualized forms that manage transitions between states of social engagement. The opening phase transforms strangers into interlocutors; the medial phase sustains the interaction through fillers, linkers, and small talk; the closing phase ensures that the termination of the encounter does not disrupt the possibility of future interaction. Without these mechanisms, conversation would lack structure, and social relations would lack continuity. The study thus confirms the insight that communication is not defined by the transmission of information but by the management of transitions—between silence and speech, distance and proximity, presence and absence. Particularly significant is the relationship between phatic communication and politeness. Drawing on classical theories of face and social interaction, the study shows that phatic expressions function as preventive strategies against face-threatening acts. They create a buffer zone in which potentially sensitive interactions can unfold without direct confrontation. Yet politeness here is not merely a matter of etiquette; it is a form of social intelligence, a capacity to navigate complex relational dynamics through minimal linguistic means. The use of hedges, fillers, and indirect expressions allows speakers to modulate their stance, to soften disagreement, and to maintain harmony even in asymmetrical power relations. In this regard, phatic communication operates as a micro-politics of language, where every utterance carries implications for hierarchy, solidarity, and mutual recognition.

The cultural dimension of phatic communication is equally central. The study highlights how religiously loaded expressions, particularly in Arabic-speaking contexts, function as universal markers of social connection. The phrase السلام عليكم is not merely a greeting; it is a performative act that invokes a shared moral and cultural framework. Its widespread use across formal and informal contexts demonstrates how deeply embedded such expressions are in the social fabric. In contrast, English phatic expressions tend to be less explicitly tied to religion and more oriented toward neutrality and universality. This contrast does not produce conflict; rather, it enriches the communicative repertoire available to speakers, allowing them to draw on multiple systems of

meaning depending on context. The multilingual workplace thus becomes a laboratory of linguistic hybridity, where phatic communication adapts to accommodate diverse cultural logics. The study's engagement with pragmatic theory—particularly the work of Paul Grice—adds another layer of interpretation. Phatic communication appears, at first glance, to violate Grice's maxims, especially those of quantity and relevance. A greeting like How are you? is not intended to elicit a detailed report; it is a ritualized exchange whose informational content is minimal. Yet from the perspective of relevance theory, such utterances are optimally relevant within their context: they achieve maximum social effect with minimal cognitive effort. They signal attention, recognition, and willingness to engage, thereby fulfilling the cooperative principle at a deeper, interactional level. What is being communicated is not information but intention—the intention to maintain the channel of communication itself.

This leads to a broader philosophical implication: phatic communication reveals that language is not primarily a system of representation but a system of relation. Its primary function is not to describe the world but to connect individuals within it. The study's findings—that phatic expressions facilitate harmony, reduce social distance, and enhance workplace cohesion—underscore this relational dimension. In a multilingual environment, where linguistic differences could easily lead to fragmentation, phatic communication provides a common ground, a set of shared practices that enable cooperation and mutual understanding. The conclusion that emerges is both simple and profound. Phatic communication is not a marginal aspect of language; it is its foundation. Without it, the transmission of information would be impossible, because the social conditions necessary for communication would not exist. The study demonstrates that even in highly diverse contexts, speakers intuitively recognize the importance of these seemingly trivial exchanges and adapt their behavior accordingly. They greet, they respond, they fill silences, they close conversations—not because they have something to say, but because they have something to sustain: the fragile, ever-negotiated network of human relations.

Hamdoun, W.M. (2024) Exploring Phatic Communication Functions among Native and Nonnative English Speakers at Saudi Multilingual Context, British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies 5(6), 1–21.

The Courtesy of Emptiness: Phatic Speech and the Social Life of Words

In Zahraa Adnan Fadhil's article The Function of Phatic Communication in the English Language, published in English Language, Literature & Culture, phatic communication appears not as an accidental residue of speech but as one of the hidden foundations of human coexistence, a linguistic practice through which people create warmth, reduce strangeness, and protect themselves from the threat of social silence. Language, in this account, does not exist solely to report facts, convey ideas, or express emotions in any direct sense. It also serves a more elusive and perhaps more indispensable task: it maintains the human bridge before anything substantial can cross it. This is why expressions such as greetings, farewells, routine inquiries, and comments that seem informationally trivial cannot be dismissed as verbal waste. Their value lies elsewhere. They do not primarily communicate something; they make communication itself possible. They open the line, preserve the line, and reassure the participants that the line still exists. The importance of phatic communication rests precisely in this paradox: the less it appears to say, the more decisively it works. The paper insists that phatic communication has a social rather than an

informative function, and this distinction is crucial because it shifts the center of language away from meaning as content and toward meaning as relation. To say Good afternoon or How do you do is not usually to seek knowledge about the other person's inner condition. It is to perform recognition, to acknowledge presence, to convert the bare fact of proximity into the beginning of a social order. The expression does not deepen knowledge, but it prevents estrangement. It inserts a small but necessary ritual between isolation and contact. In this sense, phatic language acts as a lubricant of social life. Without it, conversation would begin too abruptly, end too harshly, and leave too much exposed between individuals who are always vulnerable to embarrassment, uncertainty, or emotional distance. Phatic communication softens these dangerous edges. It allows people to enter interaction gradually, to remain within it without excessive pressure, and to leave it without symbolic violence. Such speech is therefore less concerned with the transmission of messages than with the creation of an atmosphere. It produces familiarity where there might otherwise be awkwardness, and harmony where there might otherwise be tension. The study returns to the concept first crystallized by Bronisław Malinowski, whose phrase phatic communion captured the social essence of these utterances. What matters in them is not lexical depth but the fact that something is said at all. The exchange of words overcomes silence, and silence, in human interaction, is rarely neutral. Silence can threaten, estrange, humiliate, or simply remind individuals of their separateness.

Phatic expressions exist to ward off this danger. They are the smallest possible verbal acts by which people reassure one another that sociability is still intact. In this respect, phatic communication reveals an anthropological truth about language: speech begins not in philosophy but in contact, not in contemplation but in the need to inhabit a shared world without fear. The article also emphasizes that phatic communication focuses on process rather than content. This means that language can function effectively even when the information it carries is negligible. A remark about the weather, a conventional greeting, a brief polite inquiry, or a formulaic farewell may add almost nothing to knowledge, but these utterances contribute decisively to interaction. They regulate the transition between non-communication and communication. They break the first barrier, the awkward interval before speech begins. They stabilize the encounter once it has started. They also provide a gentle mechanism for closure. The communicative act therefore unfolds through a series of ritualized forms that are socially intelligible precisely because they are predictable. Their predictability is not a weakness but their strength. Because they are conventional, they can be recognized instantly as signs of peaceful intent. In this way, phatic communication belongs to the ceremonial structure of daily life. It is language performing social maintenance. Another important point in the paper is the contextual variation of phatic expressions. Different situations, different interlocutors, and different social relations call forth different formulas. English offers a repertoire of such expressions, from the formal How do you do to the casual Nice day, and each is appropriate not because of some stable semantic content but because of its fit with the relation and the situation. Phatic communication is thus inseparable from context. It is not merely speech but situated speech. The same words spoken in one context may be warm, polite, distant, ironic, or inappropriate in another.

The phatic dimension of language therefore shows that communication is never reducible to dictionary meaning. It is shaped by social roles, by expectations, by proximity, by convention, and by the speaker's sense of what kind of relation is being enacted. This situational dependence leads naturally to the paper's discussion of politeness. Phatic communication and politeness are connected because both exceed literal meaning and operate in the domain of social relations.

Politeness is not simply a decorative moral layer added to language after the fact. It is one of the ways in which speech protects the fragile image people hold of themselves and of each other. Phatic expressions often perform precisely this function. They reduce social risk. They allow a person to acknowledge another without intruding too deeply. They show attention without demanding confession. They create nearness without abolishing boundaries. This is why phatic communication is so often the polite thing to do. To greet, to respond, to thank, to exchange a few harmless words, all these acts preserve the mutual dignity of speakers by demonstrating that neither has been ignored, dismissed, or made socially invisible. Yet the deeper significance of the article lies in what it implies about the structure of modern communication itself. If language can so effectively operate with minimal informational content, then the sphere of communication is much broader than the sphere of meaning in the strict sense. Human beings do not speak only because they have something important to say. They also speak because they cannot endure the void that would emerge if all contact had to justify itself through substantial content. Phatic communication therefore reveals that a large part of language functions as relational scaffolding. It is the architecture within which more explicit meanings can later appear. But this also opens a darker line of reflection. Once language becomes increasingly valued for its ability to keep channels open, it risks drifting away from the burden of saying anything at all. The triumph of phatic communication may then coincide with the thinning of semantic seriousness. Words continue to circulate, but much of what they now guarantee is only the continuation of contact. In such a condition, language does not disappear; it becomes incessant. It surrounds life with signs of connection while often reducing the need for thought. The social lubricant slowly becomes a system of permanent verbal maintenance. This is where the topic acquires a larger theoretical force. Phatic communication is not merely a curiosity of small talk but a sign of a world in which speech is increasingly evaluated by its success in preserving interaction rather than by its capacity to disclose truth, conflict, or depth. What begins as a necessary ritual of human warmth can expand into a whole communicative environment dominated by formulas, repetitions, and safe verbal gestures. The channel remains open, but what passes through it becomes secondary. This tendency is especially revealing in an age saturated by messages, notifications, greetings, responses, and endless minor acknowledgments.

The modern speaker is surrounded by linguistic contact, yet this abundance of connection does not necessarily restore meaning. On the contrary, it may expose how communication grows most rapidly where significance is weakest. In that sense, phatic language belongs to the wider history of how speech becomes overproduced, routinized, and increasingly dependent on conventions that preserve social circulation even while they diminish expressive risk. It shows that language can remain socially indispensable precisely at the moment when it becomes semantically lighter. And this is why phatic communication belongs to the grammar of banality in the deepest possible sense. It is the form in which ordinary life keeps speaking in order not to fall silent, the form in which society reproduces itself through small verbal gestures that seem empty but cannot be dispensed with. These gestures are banal because they are repetitive, expected, and often unnoticed. Yet they are also profound symptoms of a larger condition: language survives by multiplying low-intensity exchanges that protect relation while postponing substance.

The banal is therefore not the opposite of communication but one of its most stable modes. It is the domain in which speech maintains social peace by renouncing the burden of depth. What this reveals is not the failure of language but its strange success. Speech becomes most universal when it becomes least demanding. It remains everywhere because it no longer needs to mean very much

in order to function. In this way, phatic communication offers a small but decisive window into the broader fate of language in a world increasingly organized around contact, circulation, reassurance, and ritual repetition. It reminds us that the ordinary formulas of social life are not innocent fragments at the margins of language. They are evidence that communication increasingly persists by preserving ties in forms that are at once necessary, empty, and endlessly renewable.

Fadhil, Z.A. (2022) 'The Function of Phatic Communication in the English Language', English Language, Literature & Culture, 7(2), pp. 62–65.

The Ritual Against Silence: Phatic Speech and the Persistence of Social Contact

In Ani Vanyan's article Phatic Communication and Its Pragmatic Functions, the apparently insignificant realm of small talk is revealed as one of the most subtle and necessary mechanisms through which human beings regulate nearness, protect themselves from awkwardness, and build the first fragile bridges of social life. What is usually dismissed as empty conversation, as speech without depth or utility, turns out to possess a powerful pragmatic density. It is true that phatic utterances often seem to communicate no important facts. They do not usually introduce knowledge, settle disputes, or convey the sort of information that can be measured, verified, or stored. Yet this lack of informational substance is precisely what allows them to function so effectively in another register. They do not speak to the world of things, but to the unstable distance between persons. They belong to that domain of language where words are not instruments of truth but instruments of contact. In this sense, phatic communication is not the opposite of meaningful speech. It is the precondition that allows meaningful speech to occur without violence, embarrassment, or social coldness. It creates the atmosphere in which discourse becomes possible. It does not replace serious communication, but prepares the ground on which seriousness can safely arrive.

For this reason, phatic communication should never be interpreted only at the level of verbal form. It must be understood pragmatically, in relation to intention, situation, interpersonal distance, and the delicate economy of mood that governs every encounter. Its first major function appears at the beginning of conversation, where it serves to transform a mere physical encounter into a socially intelligible one. When people do not know each other well, small talk operates as a signal of harmlessness. It declares that the speaker approaches not as a threat but as a possible partner in interaction. The words themselves may be light, repetitive, or conventional, yet their force lies in their ability to reduce uncertainty. They allow the participants to test one another without risk. At this stage, phatic speech acts as a social probe. It measures openness, reads disposition, and offers the possibility of further exchange without demanding it. Between colleagues, strangers, or new acquaintances, it is not socially acceptable to begin with naked facts. One does not enter another's presence with the full weight of information. There must first be a verbal threshold, a ritual softness, a transitional zone where people establish whether communication itself is welcome. In this opening role, phatic communication performs not only courtesy but diagnosis. It signals one's own mood while simultaneously attempting to sense the mood of the other. A greeting is therefore never just a greeting. It is a small experiment in mutual recognition. At the end of conversation, phatic communication serves a different but equally crucial purpose. To end an exchange abruptly is to risk suggesting rejection, indifference, or fatigue with the other's presence. Small talk at this moment softens the break. It affirms that the relation continues even as the immediate exchange

must stop. In this terminal position, phatic utterances function as cushions against the violence of closure. They preserve the possibility of future contact. They reassure both speakers that the ending is circumstantial, not existential. A goodbye, a final polite question, a brief light remark before departure, all these elements belong to a rhetoric of non-finality. They prevent social severance from appearing absolute. They also transform departure into a ritual act rather than a rupture. Even the promise of a postcard, a greeting to be passed on, or an ordinary farewell formula can carry a latent consensus that the relation has not been annulled. In this respect, phatic communication is a technology of continuity. It manages the dangerous passage from interaction back into separation without allowing separation to seem hostile. Another important function emerges when phatic communication acts as a filler of silence.

Silence is never merely the absence of words. In social life it is often ambiguous, oppressive, or embarrassing. It may imply disconnection, judgment, discomfort, or emotional failure. Small talk exists partly to prevent this anxiety from taking form. By introducing even minimal verbal exchange, speakers restore movement to an atmosphere that might otherwise harden into awkwardness. This function is especially visible in transient spaces such as elevators, waiting rooms, corridors, or phone conversations, where there is often no pressing topic yet some degree of social acknowledgment is expected. Here the entire exchange may consist of chatter with almost no informational value. Yet this apparent emptiness is itself the point. The words do not need to mean very much because what they accomplish is the neutralization of tension. They reassure the participants that the shared situation need not become unbearable. Phatic speech, in such moments, works like social breathing. It keeps the atmosphere from becoming airless. Its purpose is not revelation but relief. This explains why conversations full of questions, repetitions, exclamations, and emotionally charged responses may still remain phatic even when they seem animated. Their real task is not to move toward truth but to preserve relational momentum. In this sense, even dialogue between lovers may contain a high proportion of phatic material. Questions are asked not always for answers, but to keep alive the circuit of contact itself. The article also shows that phatic communication is shaped by hierarchy, role, and setting. In workplaces and institutions it frequently appears among people on the same level, where it helps maintain collegial ease. But it can also be strategically deployed across differences in status. A superior may use small talk to reduce the harshness of authority, to motivate, or to create the impression of accessibility. A subordinate may use it to show respect while testing how much informality is permitted. In these cases, phatic communication becomes a means of calibrating social distance. It does not abolish hierarchy, but it negotiates how hierarchy will be lived verbally. This makes small talk an instrument not only of friendliness but of classification. It helps new acquaintances quickly locate one another within a social map. Education, age, regional belonging, class, and even the degree of cultural intimacy may all be indicated through seemingly insignificant formulas of greeting, response, or polite inquiry. The way one says hello can disclose far more than the content of the word hello. Phaticity therefore reveals that language is never socially innocent. Even at its most banal, it carries markers of origin, status, and belonging. The article’s distinction between direct and indirect topics deepens this insight. Direct topics concern the other person more immediately, referring to health, appearance, or personal state. Indirect topics draw from the external situation, such as the weather, the setting, or current events. Both types are useful precisely because they offer socially manageable entry points.

They are verbally safe, lightly coded, and widely recognizable. The weather, in particular, appears as a classic phatic device because it allows speech without risk. It belongs to everyone and no one.

It is substantial enough to sustain interaction, yet impersonal enough to avoid intrusion. Here one sees how deeply cultural phaticity is. What counts as an acceptable topic of light conversation varies from one society to another. In some cultures family is central; in others it may be too private. In some settings politics may be normal small talk; in others it may immediately threaten harmony. This cultural variability proves that phatic communication is not reducible to a fixed list of formulas. It is a social technique shaped by the norms of each community. Yet despite this variation, its pragmatic aim remains consistent: to manage interpersonal distance without excessive exposure. The discussion of gender differences further reveals that phatic communication is not a neutral field but one structured by expectations concerning closeness, competition, and expressive style. Female small talk, as described here, often tends toward supportive engagement, compliments, and reciprocal involvement. Male small talk may include teasing, mock aggression, or verbal competition, which nonetheless functions as a sign of solidarity rather than hostility. This is important because it shows that phatic communication does not always appear gentle on the surface. Even insults or playful put-downs may function phatically if they confirm inclusion within a familiar circle. Once again, literal meaning proves insufficient. The same words can wound in one context and bond in another. This is why phatic communication belongs to pragmatics rather than pure linguistics. It cannot be understood without reference to speaker intention, shared background, and the tacit rules of interaction. The article's final classification into communication starters, communication supporters, and communication terminators is especially useful because it makes visible the infrastructural role of phatic speech. Greetings open the social channel. Apologies, thanks, fillers, and other supportive devices keep it functioning smoothly. Farewell formulas and other closing markers end the exchange without destroying its future possibility. In all three cases, language serves less to communicate ideas than to regulate contact.

This is what makes phaticity so central and yet so often overlooked. It is everywhere in human interaction, but because it appears banal, predictable, and low in content, it is often mistaken for linguistic residue. In truth, it is one of the hidden forms of social intelligence. It enables strangers to approach, acquaintances to maintain balance, lovers to soften tension, colleagues to coexist, and speakers in general to navigate the delicate passages between silence, speech, and separation. Yet the most important implication lies deeper still. If so much of human speech is organized around maintaining contact rather than conveying thought, then language itself contains within it a powerful tendency toward ritual repetition and low-intensity exchange. The banal is not outside communication; it is built into its daily operation. The more social life depends on maintaining channels, the more speech becomes populated by formulas whose purpose is not meaning but reassurance. This does not make such speech useless. On the contrary, it makes it indispensable. But it also reveals a paradox. Language survives socially by producing countless utterances whose force lies precisely in their thinness. Words become most necessary when they are least burdened by substance. The emptiness of small talk is therefore not simple emptiness. It is a strategic lightness, a way of carrying relation without forcing content. But this same lightness also points toward a broader condition in which communication increasingly values continuity over depth, ritual over revelation, and presence over significance.

Phatic speech reminds us that human beings often do not speak because they have something important to say; they speak because silence itself has become too heavy to bear. And once this is understood, small talk no longer appears trivial. It appears as one of the fundamental rituals through which society protects itself from the abyss of unmediated distance. In that sense, phatic

communication belongs to the grammar of banality at its deepest level: it is the ordinary verbal fabric through which social life avoids rupture, sustains appearances of harmony, and perpetually renews itself in forms so familiar that their hidden necessity is almost never seen.

Vanyan, A. (2017) 'Phatic Communication and Its Pragmatic Functions', Foreign Languages in Higher Education, 1(22), pp. 74–80.

The Social Noise of Belonging: Phatic Speech and the Fabric of Human Connection

In L. Drazdauskiene's study Content and Sociolinguistic Aspects of Phatic Speech, published in Kalbotyra, the apparently empty region of speech that seems to carry no real information is brought into focus as one of the most revealing zones of human language, because it shows that words are not spoken only to describe the world, but also to create the minimal conditions under which people may endure one another, recognize one another, and remain within a common social atmosphere. Phatic speech, sometimes called phatic communion or the phatic function of speech, appears at those moments when language is used less to communicate knowledge than to establish mutuality. It is the speech of contact before content, of relation before information, of social presence before thought. This is why it can be recognized so easily in actual discourse. Unlike utterances that seek to explain, argue, narrate, or instruct, phatic expressions often seem strikingly light, repetitive, predictable, and even dispensable. Yet precisely because they are so easy to overlook, they expose something fundamental about the structure of communication itself. Human beings do not speak only because they have something urgent to say. Very often they speak because silence is too risky, too cold, too indeterminate, or too socially dangerous.

A mere exchange of words may therefore serve to prevent estrangement, suspicion, embarrassment, or the collapse of contact. In such cases, speech is not a vehicle of knowledge but a social gesture whose chief purpose is to certify that the relation still exists. The importance of this phenomenon lies in the fact that it unsettles the naïve belief that language is primarily a tool for transmitting information. There is an entire dimension of speech in which information recedes and social effect takes precedence. Drazdauskiene begins from the classical intuition, associated above all with Malinowski, that phatic communion creates ties of union through words whose referential value is secondary. Later linguistics reformulated this as the phatic function, but the essential insight remained unchanged: people very often speak not because meaning compels them, but because sociability does. The remarkable thing is that this part of language, so omnipresent in ordinary life, has remained insufficiently and inconsistently described. It appears in the margins of linguistic theory, frequently acknowledged yet rarely granted full conceptual dignity. And yet it is perhaps the most visible of all speech functions because its non-informative character stands out so sharply. When someone comments on the weather, offers a routine greeting, repeats a courtesy, or fills an awkward interval with harmless verbal motion, we immediately sense that the purpose is not cognitive enrichment. It is not the world that is being organized but the relation between those momentarily sharing it. Phatic speech therefore belongs to the social physiology of language. It circulates wherever human beings must negotiate proximity without depth, contact without commitment, and presence without disclosure. It is speech that enables coexistence without requiring intimacy. In that sense, it is the most democratic and the most banal of verbal forms, because it allows communication to proceed even when nothing important can yet, or should yet, be said.

The sociolinguistic importance of this function becomes clearer when one realizes that phatic speech is never merely neutral. Even the most formulaic utterances may reveal social position, cultural habit, education, age, and communicative etiquette. The way people greet one another, the degree of formality they choose, the amount of verbal padding they consider necessary, all these elements disclose how a social world organizes distance and closeness. Phatic speech may seem semantically thin, but it is socially dense. Its formulas are among the most stable indicators of how a community imagines civility, familiarity, hierarchy, and inclusion. This means that the supposedly empty zone of language is in fact saturated with social meaning. It is empty only from the narrow perspective that identifies meaning with denotation. Once one turns toward the social conditions of discourse, phatic speech becomes one of the richest sources of evidence. It tells us how people maintain the fabric of ordinary life, how they reduce the friction of coexistence, and how they protect themselves from the harshness of unmediated silence. That is why phatic utterances are not accidental ornaments attached to “real” speech. They are often the precondition of real speech. They create the verbal threshold that must be crossed before more substantial communication can begin. The speaker who opens with a formula of greeting is not wasting time but preparing the space in which further utterances may become acceptable. The one who sustains a light exchange is not avoiding seriousness by accident, but often postponing it prudently until the relation can bear it. The one who ends with a courteous phrase does not simply conclude a conversation but protects the possibility of future contact. Thus phatic speech marks openings, transitions, suspensions, and closures. It is the lubricant of discourse and the ceremony of social survival. Its structure may appear minimal, but its function is indispensable. Yet the more one reflects on this domain, the more one notices that phaticity discloses a deeper paradox about language. If so much of speech is organized around maintaining mutuality rather than communicating substance, then language reveals itself as a medium whose social function may exceed its cognitive one. The exchange of words often matters more than the content exchanged. Communication, in this sense, begins to detach itself from meaning and to persist as a self-justifying activity. People talk in order to keep talking, because to stop talking would expose the fragility of relation itself. This is why phatic speech, though seemingly modest, points toward one of the central tendencies of modern discourse: the expansion of verbal contact at the expense of semantic density.

The more society depends on constant interaction, the more language is called upon to preserve channels rather than articulate truths. In this condition, speech increasingly becomes atmospheric. It surrounds social life like a verbal climate, maintaining circulation, easing encounters, and preventing ruptures, while often contributing little in the way of thought. The banal formulas of everyday contact then cease to be marginal curiosities and become a dominant principle of communicative life. They show how language can proliferate precisely by becoming less burdened by significance. What matters is not the originality of what is said but the continuity of saying. Phatic speech thus stands at the threshold where language begins to transform into social noise: not noise in the sense of failure, but noise in the sense of a background hum that keeps human beings within audible reach of one another. And because this hum must be endlessly repeated, it is inseparable from banality. Banality is not here an accidental defect of language but one of its most successful social forms. It is through repetition, predictability, and formulaic ease that speech becomes capable of universal circulation. The ordinary greeting, the comment that says almost nothing, the courtesy that contains no revelation, all these survive because they are light enough to be endlessly reproducible. Their emptiness is their strength. They can be used by anyone,

anywhere, almost without risk. Yet this same strength contains a hidden danger. When speech becomes increasingly valued for its ability to preserve contact rather than deepen meaning, communication begins to drift toward a state in which its own continuation becomes more important than what it communicates. The line remains open, but the message grows thin. Language becomes socially omnipresent and semantically diluted. In that sense, phatic speech offers a miniature image of a broader communicative condition in which words are constantly exchanged while thought retreats behind ritual, politeness, repetition, and the management of mutual presence. What appears at first as a minor linguistic function therefore turns out to illuminate a much larger historical transformation. The non-informative character of phatic speech is not simply a curiosity. It reveals how language adapts to societies increasingly organized by contact, circulation, and the need to keep social surfaces smooth. It reveals, too, how verbal life may become saturated by formulas that protect relation while quietly eroding the demand for depth.

Phatic speech is therefore not merely speech devoid of information. It is speech that demonstrates that information is never the whole story of language, and perhaps not even its main story in the daily life of communities. It reminds us that the social world is held together not only by ideas, commands, and facts, but by innumerable small verbal acts whose purpose is simply to make human proximity bearable. And because these acts are so slight, so repeatable, and so difficult to distinguish from mere habit, they belong to the grammar of ordinary life at its most revealing point, where speech is neither fully meaningful nor fully meaningless, but necessary precisely because it occupies that ambiguous and endlessly reproducible middle ground. In this sense, phatic speech becomes one of the clearest signs that language is always in danger of becoming too successful as a social medium: the more perfectly it maintains contact, the less it may be required to say anything memorable. What remains is a world increasingly wrapped in verbal gestures of recognition, a world where the exchange of words survives even as the burden of meaning grows lighter, and where communication, by becoming smoother and more constant, also becomes more exposed to the quiet triumph of banality.

Drazdauskiene, L. (1975) 'Content and Sociolinguistic Aspects of Phatic Speech (in English and Lithuanian)', Kalbotyra, 26(3).

The Civility of Contact: Greetings as the Small Architecture of Human Union

In Hot Saut Halomoan's article An Analysis of Phatic Expressions Using Greetings & Salutations In English, phatic expressions are presented not as decorative fragments of language but as indispensable verbal rituals through which human beings soften separation, acknowledge one another's presence, and reaffirm the elementary bonds without which social life would quickly harden into hostility, indifference, or mutual estrangement. The value of greetings and salutations lies precisely in their apparent insignificance. They seem to carry little information, yet they are among the most socially charged utterances in ordinary life, because they do not merely say something; they do something. They initiate contact, suspend distance, create goodwill, and produce that minimal but necessary atmosphere of human recognition in which any longer conversation may safely begin. To greet another person is not only to utter a conventional formula. It is to declare that the other is not socially invisible. It is to perform a small act of civilization. This insight becomes especially urgent in a communicative age increasingly saturated with

aggression, mockery, character assassination, and verbal brutality. If language can be used to degrade, exclude, and inflame, it can also be used to civilize, to temper the social field, and to restore forms of verbal conduct that remind people that they remain members of a shared world. In this sense, phatic expressions are not trivial.

They are among the smallest moral forms of language. Their purpose is not the transmission of facts but the maintenance of social warmth. They keep the channel open, and sometimes the open channel matters more than what is eventually sent through it. This is why greetings, salutations, thanks, polite openings, and conventional closings are so deeply woven into daily existence. They convert raw proximity into sociability. They turn encounter into recognition. They prevent the silence between people from becoming a sign of coldness or rejection. The article rightly emphasizes that language should not be understood only as an instrument for messages, advice, and information. It is also a means through which human beings become more or less civilized in relation to one another. We reveal our cultural and ethical condition by the way we address others. An uncivilized use of language does not merely offend grammar or decorum; it destroys the verbal tissue through which solidarity is sustained. Phatic expressions therefore belong to that region of discourse where language works less by semantic depth than by relational tact. They are forms of minitalk, of verbal contact so slight that their importance may be overlooked, yet it is precisely their slightness that makes them universally usable. Because they are light, habitual, and low-risk, they can be exchanged by strangers, acquaintances, friends, colleagues, or correspondents without demanding deep intimacy. A greeting may be enough to establish the first fragile bridge. A salutation at the start of a letter or email may signal respect, distance, friendliness, or ceremony before the body of the message begins. A closing formula may preserve the future possibility of contact even when the present interaction has ended. These expressions thus regulate the thresholds of communication. They stand at the beginning and end, where relation is most vulnerable. The article usefully distinguishes phatic particles, words, and phrases, showing that phaticity is not restricted to full sentences. It can reside in small particles such as hey, oh, gee, well, huh, or you know, in exclamatory tokens like wow or oops, and in formulaic phrases such as good morning, how are you, nice to meet you, thank you, excuse me, or yours sincerely. What unites these forms is not their grammatical shape but their social function. They do not exist primarily to name objects or describe states of affairs.

They help speakers manage entry, interruption, hesitation, acknowledgment, closure, and the maintenance of verbal contact. Even fillers and little discourse particles can work phatically, not because they enrich meaning, but because they keep speech moving and prevent the collapse of interaction into awkwardness. The line must remain alive, even when content momentarily weakens. In this respect, phatic communication is less about what is said than about ensuring that speech as such continues to circulate. The contrast with interjections is also important. Interjections tend to express emotion directly: surprise, disgust, pain, delight, frustration. Phatic expressions, by contrast, are less emotive than attitudinal and relational. They are not primarily eruptions of feeling but signals of sociability, recognition, and stance. Their chief purpose is not to externalize the speaker’s inner state but to orient the relation between speaker and hearer. This is why phatic expressions are said to be content-free yet context-dependent. Their significance does not lie in lexical substance but in the social moment of their use. A how are you is often not a real inquiry into health but a ritual acknowledgment. A have a nice day is rarely a profound wish, but it still performs goodwill. A dear sir in a letter is more than a phrase; it establishes the tone of hierarchy and respect before any business begins. Such formulas may appear empty only if judged by a

narrow informational standard. Socially they are full. They are signs that the speaker accepts the norms of contact, that the encounter is not hostile, and that the other is granted some degree of recognition. Their apparent emptiness is what makes them so flexible, because they can be used repeatedly without overburdening the participants with demands for sincerity or depth. They are minimal commitments, and that is precisely why they work. One of the most suggestive aspects of the article is the insistence that language civilizes. This claim may sound moralistic at first, but it contains a deep sociolinguistic truth.

A community is held together not only by law, institutions, or explicit beliefs, but by innumerable tiny verbal rituals through which respect, familiarity, and acknowledgment are daily reproduced. Greetings are among the first of these rituals. They train speakers into an ethics of recognition. To greet is to concede that another person occupies the same social field and cannot be passed over as if absent. To thank is to recognize dependence. To apologize is to repair symbolic damage. To use a proper salutation in writing is to accept the ceremonial frame of communication rather than treating it as a naked transfer of content. In this sense, phatic language is a technology of coexistence. It prevents relations from becoming brutally functional. A world without such verbal gestures would be more efficient perhaps, but also more barren, abrupt, and socially violent. The civility of language begins in these formulas. Yet their importance also reveals a larger paradox. Because phatic expressions function without carrying much content, they show that communication can succeed socially while remaining semantically thin. The social bond may be maintained even when nothing substantial is communicated. This is the great strength of phatic language, but it is also the beginning of a more troubling tendency. Once the maintenance of contact becomes more important than the articulation of meaning, language begins to move toward a condition in which its social circulation outweighs its semantic burden. The ritual remains, the formula survives, the line stays open, but depth becomes optional. The verbal act is performed because the relation requires performance, not because thought presses urgently for expression. In the smallest greeting there is already a model of this broader transformation. One does not speak because something essential must be said; one speaks because the relation would become unstable without speech. This tendency, when generalized, produces a world saturated with low-intensity utterances, endless acknowledgments, and ritualized tokens of presence.

Language survives by becoming lighter, more formulaic, more repeatable, and more socially adaptive. It becomes stronger as social glue precisely by becoming weaker as a bearer of singular meaning. This is why phaticity belongs so powerfully to the grammar of banality. The banal is not the accidental residue of language but one of its most successful social forms. Greetings, closings, fillers, and polite formulas are banal because they are ordinary, repetitive, and expected. Yet banality here is not simply a defect. It is a functional necessity. People cannot repeatedly meet one another under the full pressure of seriousness. They require verbal habits that lighten contact and make repeated interaction bearable. The banal phrase does exactly this. It spares thought, reduces risk, and allows communication to proceed. But the very success of such forms also reveals how language may become increasingly dominated by routine exchanges whose primary aim is not truth, discovery, or reflection, but the preservation of social smoothness. The more communication depends on maintaining ties of union, the more it privileges formulas that can be endlessly repeated without danger. Language then becomes rich in contact and poor in necessity. Its words multiply where its burden diminishes. Phatic expressions are therefore not only signs of civility; they are also signs of how language survives through the manageable repetition of small social acts. To greet, salute, thank, excuse, and close politely is to affirm human fellowship in the smallest

available verbal units. But it is also to participate in a communicative order that increasingly values continuity over depth, ritual over revelation, and the successful performance of sociability over the risky labor of meaning.

This does not make phatic expressions false or worthless. On the contrary, it makes them central to understanding how ordinary life is verbally maintained. They show that speech is often most socially indispensable where it is least informative. And once this is understood, the simplest greeting no longer appears trivial. It appears as one of the minimal ceremonies through which society reproduces itself, through which human beings make their nearness tolerable, and through which language performs its oldest and perhaps most persistent task: not to illuminate the world, but to prevent the social world from falling apart into silence, estrangement, and cold procedural emptiness. In this sense, the study of greetings and salutations is not a marginal curiosity. It is a study of the small forms through which language defends civilization against verbal decay. And it also opens toward a deeper recognition: that when speech increasingly lives through formulas whose chief purpose is to preserve contact, language itself begins to reveal its tendency toward ritualized redundancy, toward a condition in which the maintenance of communication becomes more central than the meaning communicated. There, in the ordinary greeting, one glimpses the immense power and the quiet danger of banality: the power to bind, and the danger of binding without saying very much at all.

Halomoan, H.S. (2022) 'An Analysis of Phatic Expressions Using Greetings & Salutations In English', e-LinguaTera, 2(1).

The Ritual That Speaks Without Saying: Twelve Movements of Social Contact

In Jumanto's article Phatic Communication: How English Native Speakers Create Ties of Union, language appears not as a neutral conduit of information but as an active social force whose most persistent labor consists in sustaining human relations through utterances that, paradoxically, say almost nothing while accomplishing almost everything. What is described is not merely a linguistic category but a system of micro-rituals through which speakers continuously negotiate proximity, distance, hierarchy, and belonging. Phatic communication, in this account, is the invisible infrastructure of everyday interaction: it breaks silence, initiates exchange, maintains continuity, and softens closure, all while appearing semantically lightweight. Yet precisely in this lightness lies its strength. Language here is not burdened by truth claims or informational density; it is liberated to function as a mode of action, in Malinowski's sense, where words are exchanged less to describe the world than to hold it together. The research deepens this insight by organizing phatic communication into twelve distinct but interrelated functions, each revealing a different facet of how speech sustains social life.

Breaking silence is the most elementary act: it converts isolation into relation through the simplest gesture of acknowledgment. Starting a conversation extends this act into a deliberate opening, a controlled entry into the shared space of discourse. Making small talk and making gossip represent two divergent expansions of this opening, one governed by safety and politeness, the other by intimacy and risk, yet both serving the same underlying purpose of maintaining contact. Keeping talking reveals perhaps the most fundamental anxiety of human communication: the fear of silence as a sign of breakdown. Speech must continue, even if only through fillers, repetitions, or shifts of topic, because continuity itself becomes a value. The remaining functions—expressing solidarity, creating harmony, creating comfort, expressing empathy, expressing friendship, expressing

respect, and expressing politeness—map the subtle emotional and social calibrations that speakers perform through apparently trivial utterances. Each function corresponds to a specific adjustment in relational distance, demonstrating that language operates as a finely tuned instrument of social positioning. What emerges from this classification is a view of communication in which content is secondary and relation is primary. Words do not simply carry meaning; they regulate the space between people. They measure distance, signal alignment, soften hierarchy, and negotiate power. The inclusion of Brown and Gilman's distinction between power and solidarity is crucial here, because it reveals that phatic communication is never neutral. Even the simplest greeting is shaped by the relative positions of speaker and hearer. A short "Hi" to a close equal differs fundamentally from a longer, more formal greeting to a distant superior. The difference is not merely stylistic; it encodes a social structure. Language thus becomes a visible trace of invisible relations. It records hierarchy while simultaneously managing it. It reduces distance or maintains it, depending on the demands of the situation. This is why phatic communication is so closely tied to politeness. Politeness is not an optional embellishment but a strategic necessity in a world where every utterance risks disrupting the fragile equilibrium between individuals. Through phatic expressions, speakers enact both negative politeness—maintaining distance and avoiding imposition—and positive politeness—reducing distance and affirming closeness.

The same linguistic system can therefore produce deference or familiarity, depending on context. What appears as a set of empty formulas is in fact a flexible mechanism for social adjustment. The study's attention to expression types further reinforces this point. Greetings, apologies, compliments, thanks, jokes, and even indirect criticism all function phatically when their primary role is relational rather than informational. A compliment does not simply evaluate; it aligns. An apology does not only admit fault; it repairs a breach. A joke does not merely amuse; it reduces tension or signals intimacy. Even seemingly negative forms such as mild insults or mocking can function as markers of solidarity when used among close interlocutors. The boundary between content and function dissolves. What matters is not what is said but what the saying does to the relationship. In this sense, phatic communication reveals the performative dimension of language in its most ordinary form. It shows that every utterance participates in a continuous process of relational maintenance. The implications of this are far-reaching. If language is constantly engaged in maintaining social bonds, then communication becomes less about transmitting knowledge and more about sustaining presence. The speaker must continually signal that the line remains open, that the interaction has not collapsed, that the other is still acknowledged. This produces a communicative environment in which silence becomes suspicious and speech becomes obligatory. The twelve functions identified in the research can thus be read as strategies for preventing communicative breakdown. They are mechanisms for keeping the social machine running. But this also reveals a deeper tension within language itself. The more communication is oriented toward maintaining contact, the less it depends on substantive content. Speech becomes self-sustaining. It continues not because something needs to be said, but because the relation demands that something be said. The result is a proliferation of utterances whose primary function is to prevent the absence of utterance. Language fills its own gaps. It produces continuity as an end in itself. This is where phatic communication begins to illuminate a broader condition of linguistic life. The social necessity of keeping contact alive generates a vast domain of speech that is structurally repetitive, semantically light, and endlessly renewable.

Greetings can be repeated indefinitely. Small talk cycles through predictable topics. Fillers and acknowledgments maintain rhythm without advancing content. Politeness formulas stabilize

interaction without transforming it. What emerges is a system of communication that is highly effective at preserving relations but increasingly indifferent to the uniqueness of meaning. The strength of this system lies in its reliability. It allows strangers to interact without risk, acquaintances to maintain contact without effort, and communities to reproduce themselves through shared verbal routines. Yet this same reliability introduces a certain inertia. Because phatic expressions must be widely usable, they tend toward standardization. Because they must be low-risk, they avoid depth. Because they must be repeatable, they resist novelty. Language thus develops a layer that is both indispensable and limiting: indispensable because it sustains social life, limiting because it reduces communication to predictable patterns. The twelve functions described by Jumanto can therefore be seen not only as tools of social cohesion but also as indicators of how language manages its own redundancy. Each function contributes to a system in which the continuation of communication becomes more important than the transformation of meaning. Breaking silence matters more than what breaks it. Keeping talking matters more than what is said. Expressing politeness matters more than the substance of the exchange. In this sense, phatic communication reveals a fundamental paradox: language achieves its greatest social success precisely where it minimizes its informational ambition. The ties of union are strongest where meaning is weakest. This paradox does not invalidate phatic communication; it defines it. It shows that human beings require a form of speech that is structurally simple, socially effective, and semantically flexible. Without such a form, interaction would be too demanding, too risky, too fragile to sustain. But it also suggests that language contains within itself a tendency toward self-neutralization, toward a mode of operation in which its primary function is no longer to reveal or transform reality but to maintain the conditions of its own circulation.

The study thus opens a path toward understanding how communication can become both omnipresent and superficial, both socially rich and semantically thin. The twelve functions are not merely descriptive categories; they are the elementary movements of a linguistic system that prioritizes connection over content. They show how language becomes a continuous act of social maintenance, a ritual that persists even when meaning recedes. And in this persistence, one can discern a broader trajectory: the gradual shift from language as a vehicle of necessity to language as a mechanism of continuity, where the most important thing is not what is said, but that something is always being said.

Jumanto (2014) 'Phatic Communication: How English Native Speakers Create Ties of Union', American Journal of Linguistics, 3(1), pp. 9–16.

Conclusion: The Triumph of Empty Speech: When Language Survives Its Own Collapse

This concluding chapter returns to the central insight of The Miscommunication Trilogy: language does not disappear when it fails. It persists. It multiplies. It adapts. The paradox that has guided the entire investigation now becomes fully visible—communication expands precisely at the moment when meaning begins to erode. What appears, at first, as a decline is in fact a transformation. Language is not dying; it is outgrowing its original function. And in that excess, in that uncontrolled expansion, it becomes something else entirely.

Phatic communication stands at the center of this transformation. It is the most modest and yet the most revealing form of speech. It does not claim to inform, persuade, or describe. It does not aspire

to truth. It exists for a simpler purpose: to maintain contact. Yet this simplicity is deceptive. In its refusal to carry meaning, phatic speech exposes the hidden architecture of communication. It reveals that language can operate without reference, without depth, without substance—and still remain indispensable. Throughout this work, phatic expressions have appeared in their many forms: greetings, small talk, conversational fillers, polite closures, digital acknowledgments. These forms are not accidental or peripheral. They are the infrastructure of communication. They ensure that interaction continues, that silence is avoided, that the fragile thread connecting individuals is never fully severed. In doing so, they transform communication into a continuous process of maintenance. The goal is no longer to say something meaningful, but to keep saying something. This shift marks the beginning of a new linguistic condition. Language becomes self-sustaining. It no longer depends on external reality for its justification. It feeds on its own activity, generating more speech from existing speech. The result is a system that is always in motion, always active, yet increasingly detached from the world it once sought to represent. In this system, meaning is not eliminated but diluted. It becomes one function among many, no longer dominant, no longer necessary.

The concept of the planned obsolescence of language captures this condition with precision. It does not suggest a conspiracy or a deliberate design. Rather, it describes a structural tendency. As communication becomes more central to social life, the pressure to maintain constant interaction intensifies. Phatic communication offers a solution to this pressure. It provides a low-cost, low-risk form of speech that can be endlessly repeated. It allows individuals to participate in communication without committing to meaning. Over time, this solution becomes the norm. The consequences of this normalization are profound. Language begins to resemble a system of signals rather than a system of meanings. Utterances function as indicators of presence, availability, and alignment rather than as carriers of information. The question “How are you?” no longer seeks an answer. The response “I’m fine” no longer describes a state. These expressions circulate as empty forms, recognized and accepted precisely because they are empty. Their value lies in their predictability, their neutrality, their ability to sustain interaction without risk. In this sense, phatic communication is not a failure of language but its adaptation to new conditions. It reflects a world in which social cohesion depends less on shared truths than on continuous contact. The maintenance of relationships becomes more important than the exchange of information. Language adjusts accordingly. It becomes lighter, faster, more flexible. It sacrifices depth for speed, precision for accessibility, meaning for continuity.

This adaptation is particularly visible in digital communication. The rise of instant messaging, social media, and networked platforms has created an environment in which communication is constant. Messages are sent and received at all times, across all contexts. In such an environment, the demand for content exceeds the supply of meaningful information. Phatic communication fills this gap. It provides a repertoire of expressions that can be deployed without effort, without risk, without consequence. A like, an emoji, a brief acknowledgment—these are the minimal units of digital interaction. They sustain the network while contributing little to its informational content. The digital amplification of phatic communication reveals its underlying logic. Communication becomes a matter of participation rather than expression. To be present is to communicate. To remain silent is to disappear. In this context, phatic speech functions as a marker of existence. It signals that one is still there, still connected, still part of the network. The content of the message

is secondary. What matters is the act of sending it. This redefinition of communication has implications that extend beyond language. It reshapes the way individuals relate to each other, to society, and to themselves. Relationships become mediated by continuous interaction, sustained by a flow of low-content exchanges. Identity becomes a function of visibility, maintained through constant signaling. The boundary between communication and existence begins to blur. To communicate is to be.

At the same time, this condition introduces a new form of instability. The constant demand for communication creates a tension between presence and meaning. The more individuals communicate, the less they have to say. The more they rely on phatic expressions, the more their speech becomes predictable, repetitive, and empty. This tension is not resolved but managed. Phatic communication provides a way to navigate it, to maintain interaction without addressing its underlying contradictions. The result is a form of communication that is both stable and fragile. It is stable in its continuity, in its ability to sustain interaction over time. It is fragile in its dependence on repetition, in its lack of substantive content. A breakdown in phatic communication—a failure to greet, to respond, to acknowledge—can disrupt the entire interaction. Silence, once again, emerges as the ultimate threat. It is the point at which communication ceases to function, at which the illusion of connection collapses. This fear of silence explains the persistence of phatic speech. It is not simply a habit or a convention; it is a necessity. It protects against the void, against the possibility of disconnection. It ensures that communication continues, even when there is nothing to communicate. In doing so, it transforms language into a defense mechanism. Speech becomes a barrier against absence, a way of filling the space that would otherwise remain empty.

Yet this filling of space comes at a cost. It reduces the capacity of language to accommodate silence, to allow for pauses, for reflection, for the emergence of meaning. The constant flow of phatic expressions leaves little room for anything else. Communication becomes saturated, leaving no gaps, no openings, no moments of stillness. In such an environment, meaning struggles to survive. It is drowned out by the noise of continuous interaction. The trilogy has traced this process across different domains, showing how language adapts to the pressures of modern communication. Phatic speech is one manifestation of a broader tendency toward linguistic entropy. As language expands, it becomes less efficient as a carrier of meaning. It accumulates forms, repetitions, redundancies. It becomes heavier, even as it appears lighter. The surface becomes more active, while the depth recedes. And yet, this is not a story of simple decline. It is a story of transformation. Language does not return to a state of purity or clarity. It does not recover its lost function. Instead, it evolves into a new form, one that reflects the conditions of contemporary life. Phatic communication is part of this evolution. It represents a shift from language as a tool of representation to language as a medium of connection.

This shift challenges many of the assumptions that have traditionally guided the study of language. It calls into question the centrality of meaning, the primacy of information, the ideal of clarity. It suggests that communication cannot be understood solely in terms of what is said. It must also be understood in terms of what is done, of how speech functions within a social context. Phatic communication makes this functional dimension visible. At the same time, it invites a reconsideration of the relationship between language and truth. If communication can operate without meaning, then truth is no longer its defining criterion. Language becomes indifferent to

the distinction between true and false, meaningful and meaningless. It becomes a system that operates according to its own logic, driven by the need for continuity rather than the pursuit of accuracy. This indifference is not absolute. Meaning and truth continue to exist within the system, but they are no longer central. They are embedded within a larger network of phatic interactions, surrounded by layers of empty speech. Their visibility is reduced, their impact diluted. They compete with a multitude of signals that serve different functions. In this competition, they do not always prevail.

The planned obsolescence of language thus reveals a fundamental ambiguity. Language is both more and less than it was. It is more pervasive, more active, more integrated into social life. It is less precise, less informative, less reliable as a medium of meaning. This ambiguity cannot be resolved. It must be acknowledged as a defining feature of contemporary communication. In concluding this exploration, it becomes clear that phatic communication is not an anomaly but a key to understanding this ambiguity. It shows how language can continue to function even as its traditional role diminishes. It demonstrates that communication does not depend on meaning alone. It depends on the maintenance of contact, on the continuous exchange of signals that sustain social relations. The future of language, if such a term can still be used, lies within this tension. It will not be a return to a lost state of clarity. It will not be a complete collapse into silence. It will be a continuation of the process described here—a process in which language adapts, expands, and transforms. Phatic communication will remain at the center of this process, both as a symptom of linguistic entropy and as a mechanism for sustaining communication.

The final insight of The Miscommunication Trilogy is therefore not a conclusion but a recognition. Language survives by changing the terms of its own existence. It becomes obsolete not by disappearing, but by continuing to function in a different way. In this sense, the triumph of empty speech is not the end of language, but its most revealing moment.

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